

Port research link

Lisa Tisdell

PORT Macquarie Koala Hospital has played a role in groundbreaking research.

Scientists used the genetic material of an adult female koala, named Pacific Choccy, from the koala hospital in a world-first breakthrough which sequenced the koala genome.

A consortium of Australian scientists completed the initial sequencing of the koala genome – the genetic blueprint for koalas.

Tissue samples from Pacific Choccy were snap frozen in liquid nitrogen in preparation for the research.

Other tissue samples came from a male koala from Queensland's Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital.

Dr Rebecca Johnson from the Australian Museum's Australian Centre for Wildlife Genomics praised Port Macquarie Koala Hospital's support of the research.

"Pacific Choccy is definitely going to contribute a lot to what we know about koalas," she said.

Dr Johnson said the more that was known about koala genes, the way their genes translated to their incredible lifestyle and the way the genes translated to their susceptibility to some diseases, could only benefit the koala in the long-term and their long-term survival.

Pacific Choccy, named for her choco-

late colour, had advanced chlamydia.

The research consortium of Australian scientists is led by Dr Rebecca Johnson of the Australia Museum and Professor Peter Timms of the Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

Port Macquarie Koala Hospital supervisor Cheyne Flanagan said the koala hospital team was just so proud of the its involvement in the research.

The Port Macquarie link to the research was a closely guarded secret before this week's announcement.

Ms Flanagan said the research had far reaching implications.

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"From a scientific perspective, this is enormous," she said about the scientific breakthrough.

Scientists at the Australian Museum and QUT have already discovered more than 12,000 koala genes.

QUT's Professor Timms said part of the data was helping researchers understand why Queensland and NSW koala popula-

tions had been crippled by the spread of chlamydia while Victorian populations remained virtually unaffected.

The research also revealed the majority of koala genomic sequences shared similarities to that of the Tasmanian devil.

Meanwhile, the koala hospital also supplied the Australian Museum with six years' worth of ear plug samples.

Early analysis shows the koala population in Port Macquarie area is genetically diverse.