

The wildlife warrior

Chris Canty meets up with an inspirational, award-winning doctor who has dedicated his life to saving wildlife

HE IS AT AN AGE THAT MOST

would retire, but for specialist wildlife veterinarian Dr Howard Ralph, the working hours have never been so long, the travel so far and the cause so important.

“Our service is sometimes the last opportunity for wildlife to recover and survive,” he says. “It would be a modern tragedy if the service did not continue.”

The service Howard is referring to is Southern Cross Wildlife Care (SCWC), started by him and his wife Glenda, five years ago. Despite his many accolades, including being a finalist in the 2014 Australia’s Local Hero Award and the winner of the 2013 NRMA Volunteer Award for Conservation, he continues to work 100-hour weeks and treat around 2500 animals a year. Most of which would have suffered and invariably died without him.

“Ideally, wildlife should be able to access high-quality veterinary care at least equivalent to that available to domestic species and humans,” says Howard, who is also a practising doctor of medicine. “To achieve that, we needed to establish a geographic focus that could provide a high-quality service to wildlife and also find a way to finance the care required.”

SCWC, based in NSW’s Southern

Tablelands (though often follows him home to Sydney), was created in an attempt to formalise veterinary treatment for the increasing number of wildlife patients that have found it difficult to access adequate care. One major problem is that veterinary treatment can be costly and Howard has tried to provide a service that is partly supported by SCWC as a not-for-profit organisation.

“We have spent a lot of time and suffered considerable emotional and financial stress but have been able to generate enough resources to establish the service,” he says. “That means that there are many patients that would have otherwise not been treated.”

Each year, Howard travels up to 150,000 kilometres, often with nothing but a station wagon, an emergency trailer and a tent as support. It’s a tiring and sometimes thankless journey, as the SCWC receives no government funding, yet many in the field see him as a living legend, including Lindy Stacker, SCWC’s co-ordinator and treasurer. Comically describing her job description as “general possum bottom wiper and cleaner upper”, she works in the trenches with Howard and knows him better than most.

“I first met him at Duck Rescue (helping people to help ducks) and

I was absolutely amazed at the level of Howard’s devotion, persistence and skills,” she says. “He is like a walking encyclopaedia and as a wildlife carer, his advice and assistance have been invaluable. I had never seen anyone work so furiously for wildlife, which I felt was long overdue. His tenacity and endurance was mind blowing. He was so capable and competent and so very calm in a crisis. You always felt kind of safe when Howard was around performing his magic.”

Like others before her, it was Howard’s devotion to the cause that led her to join the SCWC beside him.

“My attraction was understanding what Howard was trying to achieve,” says Lindy. “I knew he couldn’t do this alone (there was only he and his wife trying to treat many, many wild creatures), and he needed help and finances. I just knew he wouldn’t turn away any animal and I realised how special he was. So many vets won’t do basic surgery on wildlife, let alone complex operations that take hours. Profit didn’t motivate Howard but mercy did.”

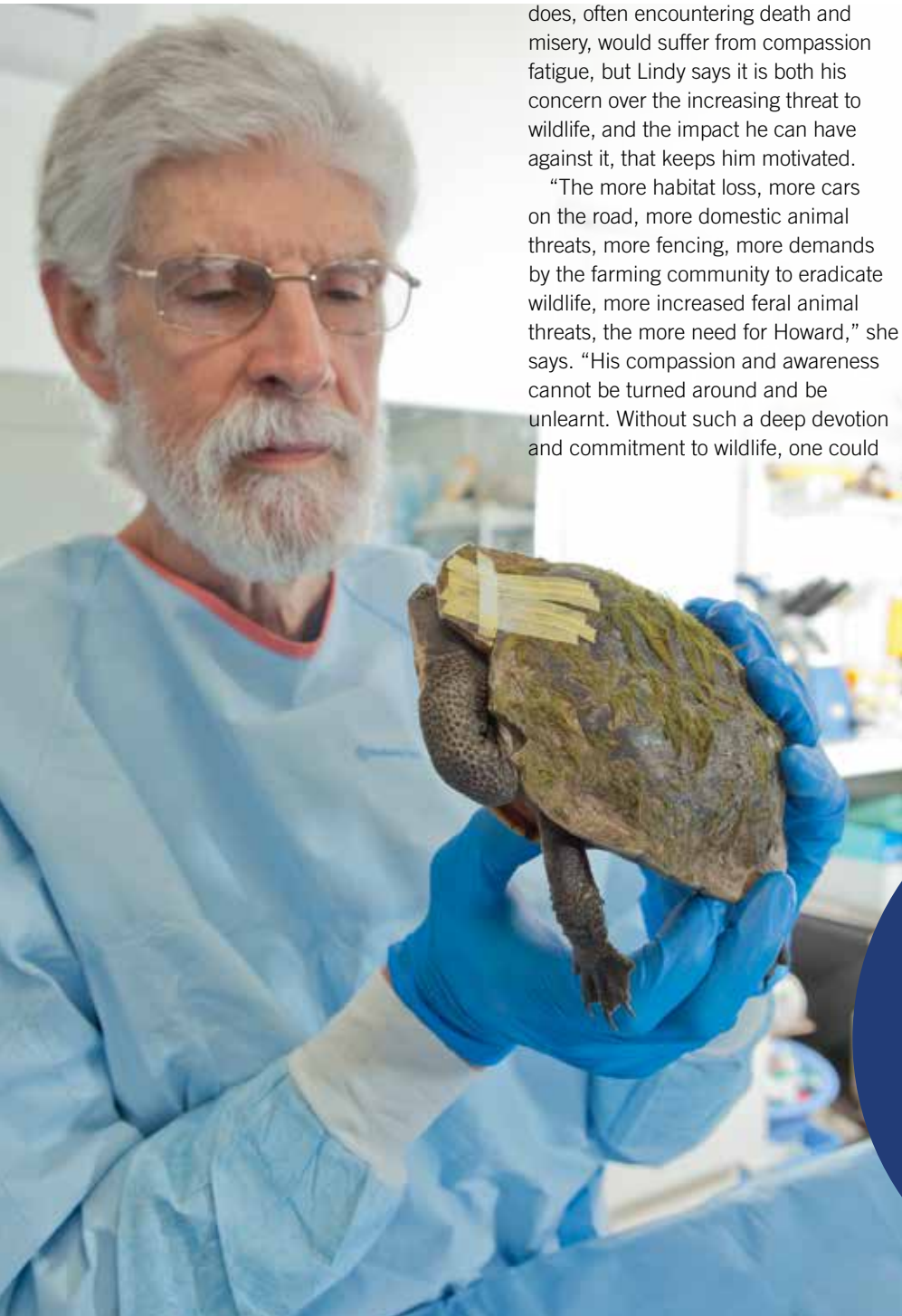
While the centre was not created to make money, lack of funding and community awareness are some of Howard’s biggest concerns.

“Frustrations are many, varied and



Dr Howard Ralph
devotes over 100
hours a week to treat
injured wildlife.

Dr Ralph examines an eastern long-necked turtle whose shell has cracked.



seem to be increasing,” he says. “A major one is the increasing cost of everything that we need in order to continue the service. The escalating cost of power, telephone, insurance, maintenance and more are difficult. We constantly struggle to meet these expenses and volunteer activities to keep going. There is no magic solution. Our limited number of volunteers is fully occupied coping with these demands.”

It's thought those who do what Howard does, often encountering death and misery, would suffer from compassion fatigue, but Lindy says it is both his concern over the increasing threat to wildlife, and the impact he can have against it, that keeps him motivated.

“The more habitat loss, more cars on the road, more domestic animal threats, more fencing, more demands by the farming community to eradicate wildlife, more increased feral animal threats, the more need for Howard,” she says. “His compassion and awareness cannot be turned around and be unlearned. Without such a deep devotion and commitment to wildlife, one could

not keep persisting against all odds.”

One recent example of Howard's motivation was when a juvenile wombat was orphaned after her mother was killed by a car. As well as other problems, she also suffered paralysis of one front leg because of damage to a critical nerve. Wombats, even the young, may be inclined to reject devices such as splints and after various treatments, the paralysis persisted. Eventually, she required an operation to correct the problem and she was released as a fully fit young adult able to run and dig and protect herself.

It is Howard's willingness to perform operations other vets might not that makes him stand out in the profession.

“Howard adapts and achieves innovative procedures and techniques others just don't either think about or attempt,” Lindy says. “This is why we have added ‘SCWC Research & Referral Centre’ to our name. Many precious wild creatures die because either vets have little experience with wildlife, or it is easier. Fractures are often not treated and many vets euthanise wildlife sadly for these reasons when treatment would be preferable.”

A recent undertaking of the SCWC is to train carers, veterinary nurses and veterinary surgeons in improving wildlife care. Conducted Australia-wide, the purpose is to improve the level of care for wildlife in specific situations, especially disasters such as bush fires, cyclones,

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Lindy Stacker, Southern Cross Wildlife Care's co-ordinator and treasurer



floods and habitat destruction. Despite the hope that Howard can share his skills to a wider audience, Lindy adds that wildlife carers are not refunded in any way for their expenses incurred and are not even afforded tax concessions for all their expenses, such as cages, medications, food and bandages. It's one of the reasons why Howard says the future is uncertain.

“There is a growing demand for our service but we are constrained by the limits mentioned such as increasing costs and limited volunteers,” he says. “Some people assume that we are able to run on thin air and with little help. To continue to provide a high-quality, accessible service specifically for wildlife, we need adequate support.”

Lindy says Howard is frustrated by having to do so much work that could be done and shared by others. Yet despite these frustrations, he never loses hope and does not deter from his mission to help injured wildlife.

“Howard has shaped my life, and that of many others, by being a living example of what one can achieve by acting and not just talking about what needs to change,” Lindy says.

“Rather than be frustrated and stymied by government and bureaucracies, Howard just gets on with what's most important to him. He is tormented by their long-suffering and much maligned status and that is something he and I (and many others) feel united and bonded by. The voiceless need *our* voices.”

Howard's immediate short-term



Some of the hard-working team from Southern Cross Wildlife Care: Jerry Willimann (left), Dr Howard Ralph and Lynleigh Greig.

plan is to streamline the workload and encourage more people with skills to get involved, though the long-term plan is to find someone who could take over from him and ease his long hours on the road.

Lindy thinks replacing him would be near impossible however.

“One can learn the skills but you can't learn this level of compassion,” she says. “Howard never turns *any* animal away and makes himself available 24/7 and there is no-one else that we know of, who is prepared to do this. Without his devotion, some 2000 to 3000 wild creatures would suffer and die annually.”

Last words are reserved for Lindy, who sums Howard up best, obviously seeing him as much more than just a boss.

“I have witnessed him bring back animals from the dead,” she recalls. “I often thought to myself how I wish

I had his skills and his brain. If you were an animal suffering and/or dying, you would want to look up and see Howard looking down at you.”

SCWC is currently seeking volunteers with medical knowledge or qualifications such as a veterinary degree or veterinary nursing. More information on this and any tax-free donations can be found at southerncrosswildlifecare.org.au. ➤



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