

Birth helps wombats pull back from brink



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ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

THIS grainy night-time image is the first picture of one of the planet's most important mums.

The bulky pouch of the endangered, northern hairy-nosed wombat is the first evidence that a handful of Environment Department scientists have done what many thought impossible – pull the world's most endangered large marsupial back from its spiral to extinction.

Her baby bump shows she is the first wombat to give birth at a colony set up near St George in southwest Queensland in 2009.

She and eight others were brought to St George in 2009 from the last remaining colony at Epping Forest National Park in central Queensland where just 138 survive.

Her joey is thought to be about five months old. It would have been hairless and about the size of a jelly bean when born, but now the furry bundle is thought to be about the size of a fist and can be seen wriggling in the pouch.

Apart from obtaining camera footage, scientists cannot go near the animal for fear the upset will cause her to lose her precious young.

Environment Minister Kate Jones said yesterday the birth of an endangered animal at any time was good news, but this was particularly important.

"The birth... means our hopes that the wombats would mate and the population would start to grow at Yarran Downs are coming true," she said.

The colony is at Gabbi and Ed



REVIVAL: Scientist Dr Alan Horsup holds up a northern hairy-nosed wombat, part of a milestone establishment of a wild colony of the species near St George, and (inset) the group's first mother.

Underwood's 3240ha cattle station. Wombats inhabited the area before being wiped out by clearing and competition with domestic stock.

Research started on the Epping colony by Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service scientist Dr Alan Horsup more than a decade ago.

With a tiny budget, he ferreted around in second-hand shops, buying old shower bases and junk to use for supplementary feeding and watering.

Environment Department threatened species director Rebecca Williams said yesterday it had been a courageous scientific and political decision to relocate the wombats because it carried such a high risk of failure.

"But to do nothing may well have been the end of them," she said. "To be successful the first time we tried a translocation with such a difficult creature is fantastic. We know now that breeding can occur, that this wombat is not

spending all her energy concerned about her environment.

"The wombats have got on with life and part of life is having babies."

Ms Jones said if all went well, the joey would spend about a year with its mum before venturing out alone.

The Courier-Mail raised about \$200,000 for the wombat project in the early-1990s and this was followed up with a \$3 million donation from miner Xstrata.