



"Celebrate the wins, learn from the lows": field ecology with Kelly Rayner

by Susie / August 16, 2022 / 2 Comments

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Today we spoke with the amazing Kelly Rayner (pronouns: she/her), a bird bander, Senior technical officer and all-round amazing human who has spent the last 12 years working on wildlife conservation programs across Western Australia with the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. We caught up with Kelly to discuss all things field work, reintroduction and avoiding burnout in ecology so you can stay in the field for a long time.

"celebrate the wins
learn from the lows"
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LONGEVITY IN THE FIELD**



"Celebrate the wins, learn from the lows": field ecology with Kelly Rayner | #itsawildlife

Image Credit: Rebecca Quah

KELLY'S JOURNEY

Like so many young people, Kelly had no idea that working with wildlife or in conservation was even a "thing". She explains:

"All I knew when choosing my university course was that I didn't want to work in an office. When I saw the course with a photo of someone standing outside, holding a lizard, the decision was made!"

And just like that, Kelly enrolled in wildlife management at the University of Western Australia. She found that the course had more of an agricultural focus and after 12 months, transferred to a more wildlife conservation-focused course, and picked her elective subjects based on whether they offered fieldwork.

Towards the middle of her third year of undergrad, Kelly began asking around about potential honours projects and landed a project focused on understanding the ecology of the threatened Western Quoll in semi-arid environments.

The Western Quoll or Chuditch is a threatened, spotty carnivore, once found across 70 % of the Australian mainland but which declined significantly to 5 % of its original range, mostly within the jarrah forests of south-western Australia. In the late 2000s, a consultancy working around a mine site in the semi-arid Great Western Woodlands in southern Western Australia captured a Western Quoll, and following this surprise discovery, funding was secured to investigate further.

Kelly was charged with better understanding the ecology of the Western Quoll in this semi-arid landscape. To do this, she collected data on the home range, population density and diet of individuals found within this area by radio tracking, trapping and collecting scats respectively. Kelly found Western Quolls lived at much lower densities in semi-arid areas than in the jarrah forests and had larger home ranges to contend with the sparser resources available in this habitat. The diet of animals in the semi-arid area was similar to those in the Jarrah forests, with individuals exhibiting a generalist carnivorous diet - "...eating anything that could fit in their mouths".

When asked about advice on finding cool post-grad projects like hers, Kelly said -

"For me, it was all about timing, and often more about who you know rather than what you know - get out and start speaking to people who do a job or research you're interested in".

Following the conclusion of her thesis, Kelly had begun to line up a year of travel and voluntary work when she got a call from one of her honours supervisors offering casual ecology work. When she mentioned her plans to volunteer, the response was -

"Cancel it"

And what good advice that was, because 12 years on, Kelly is still working with what is now called the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions in their animal science program. What started as a short-term casual contract working on lots of projects where she gained a large diversity of field experiences from working with quolls, rodents, feral cats and so much more from the north-west to the south-coast of Australia and many places in between. These early years as a field laccie gave Kelly the opportunity to grow as a person and build her skills and experience working with different people and different species in different habitats.

With her longevity in her job, Kelly found that her focus began to narrow onto fewer projects which required more of her time and responsibility. The project Kelly now dedicates her time to is an ecological restoration project on a semi-arid island off the mid-west coast of Western Australia known as [Return to 1616: Ecological restoration of Dirk Hartog Island National Park.](#)

RETURN TO 1616

The aim of this ambitious project is "to ecologically restore Wirruwana or Dirk Hartog Island National Park with a vision of creating a special place with healthy vegetation and an ecosystem that supports a full suite of species, as might have been encountered before the arrival of Europeans in Australia".

Dirk Hartog Island is famous for being one of the first places where early Dutch explorer, Dirk Hartog landed on Australia's shores. He laid a plate but quite frankly didn't think much of it and carried on his way. This history is the reason behind the name of the project: ultimately, re-creating a landscape functionally and visually similar to what those early explorers would have experienced.

The project is being completed in two main stages: the feral animal eradication stage (sheep, goats and cats were removed from 2008 to 2018) and now the reintroduction stage which began in 2017 with the trial reintroduction of hare-wallabies and ultimately intends to return 13 species to this island: one bird, the Western Grasswren and 12 mammals. To date, the Dirk Hartog team that Kelly is a part of, have completed the releases of banded hare-wallabies, rufous hare-wallabies, Shark Bay bandicoots, Shark Bay mice and greater stick-nest rats translocating enough animals to meet the recommended founder population size of genetic viability for an island this large.

This year, the project aims to top up the numbers dibblers further translocations, as well as initiate the reintroduction of the Western Grasswren. This leaves only six more species - the boodie or burrowing bettong, the woylie or brush-tailed bettong, the brush-tailed mulgara, the desert mouse, the heath mouse and the chuditch or western quoll - all to be reintroduced in the future before the project is considered complete.

With an amazing lineup of threatened species, keeping up with this ambitious project is incredibly exciting! One of the most exciting conservation aspects of the project is that it has secure funding until 2030 which allows plenty of time to complete the reintroductions AND monitor the outcomes of each as well as the impact on the ecological health of the island. You can follow along with project updates [here](#).



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Image Credit: Jackie Brown

WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND PREVENTING BURNOUT

Being part of exciting and ambitious projects is one of the main things that drives passionate ecologists like Kelly. And, in passion-driven industries like ecology and wildlife conservation, there is often a culture around hard work and in some cases, extreme dedication and personal sacrifices for the cause.

While both passion and compassion are amazing qualities of so many ecologists, and can produce unrivaled motivation to achieve great results for wildlife and conservation, it can also be tempting to slip into patterns that blur the lines between work and life. This can degrade personal boundaries and lead to burnout, a state of mental exhaustion, if left unchecked.

While there is definitely a responsibility on employers and the ecological community itself to open up the conversation about burnout and look at ways to improve wellbeing for people in this passion-driven industry, it is also our own responsibility (to ourselves, to our employers and to our longevity within our roles) to prevent burnout by implementing a healthy work-life balance.

As someone who has dedicated over a decade to exciting and important projects with high responsibility and energy requirements, Kelly has some valuable insights on preventing burnout which she shares here:

"Especially when spending long periods of time undertaking remote field work, fatigue can make it challenging to maintain a good mental space. Triggers, and your responses to them can surprise you when you feel mentally exhausted and over time small triggers that are left unresolved can build up into bigger challenges to overcome"

Kelly has a vast amount of experience in these conditions and offers the following advice to help you prevent yourself from burning out.

A good rule to follow is "when it stops being fun, take a moment"

Take a step back and try to work out what is triggering you or what component is challenging you. For example, is it the type of work, is it the distance from friends and family, is it something else?

In a career with no set pathway, nothing is compulsory – you can have a successful conservation career based in a lab, in the field or in a role like accounting or administration that isn't typically associated with conservation. Also, you don't have to work in the industry to care about wildlife conservation. And, you can stop for a while or dip in and out of the field – you create your own pathway! So never feel pressure to do or be things if it isn't feeling right for you and your circumstances.

Take opportunities outside your normal role to learn, regroup or refresh

You never know, there might be something else that is perfect for you – try out different roles, organization structures, priorities and tasks. Or sometimes you just need a break to remind yourself that what you have is perfect.



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Image Credit: Fiona Knox

PROS AND CONS OF ECOLOGY LIFE

For Kelly, working as an ecologist is her dream job and after so many years, she couldn't imagine doing anything else! When asked what aspects she loved the most, Kelly had many:

"For me, one of the best parts of working on Dirk Hartog Island is being able to see the horizon in all directions. The reality of island life is that it can be chaotic but you get to have incredible experiences with amazing people."

Kelly said she felt so lucky to work on such an exciting and successful reintroduction program:

"The unfortunate reality of translocations is that there is a high rate of failure due to various factors. A review completed by Jeff Short in 2009 found that only 32 % of translocations in Australia were perceived as successful. I feel so grateful to be working on such an ambitious and well-planned project like Return to 1616 where we work in such a supportive and collaborative environment with enthusiastic people who all want to see the project succeed."

Like any role in an under-funded industry like ecology, there are always challenges including limited stability, low pay and high competition for jobs. Although it can be challenging to get your foot in the door, persistence certainly pays off!

When asked about the worst part of working in ecology, Kelly said the most frustrating part was the lack of broader support and funding for protecting Australia's wildlife:

"People can't value what they don't know exists and I see this as one of the most limiting factors in Australia's conservation space. One of the best parts about the Return to 1616 project is as it is occurring in a National Park, it will provide an avenue for people in the community to experience some remarkable native species they wouldn't have an opportunity to experience otherwise"

KELLY'S ADVICE

When asked what advice she would give to students looking to step into a role like hers, Kelly's advice was simple:

"celebrate the wins and learn from the lows"



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Image Credit: Kelly Raynor

KEEP IN TOUCH

You can follow Kelly's adventures on [Instagram @kellyjelly88](#), [Linked In](#) and [Twitter @chuditchwrangla](#) You can read up on Kelly's [scientific publications on Research Gate](#) and follow updates on the Department of Biodiversity Conservation and Attractions [Return to 1616 ecological restoration project here](#)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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2 thoughts on "Celebrate the wins, learn from the lows": field ecology with Kelly Rayner"



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Susie

September 13, 2022 at 5:48 pm

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