

Making ripples for conservation



The beauty and popularity of the Swan Canning Riverpark mask the challenges faced by this iconic symbol of Perth. The health of the rivers evokes passionate advocacy from scientists, conservationists, wildlife carers and ecologists who all came together to raise public awareness of the river system at the second annual River Guardians Festival.

by Hannah Beaney



The Swan Canning Riverpark is a symbol of continuity for an everchanging community. The river system holds immense cultural significance for the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, who have lived in the area for at least 40,000 years. It's a vital source of sustenance, a spiritual connection, and a gathering place for ceremonies and ritual. Today, the Riverpark remains a staple of Perth for its resident wildlife, locals and visitors. There's a growing community of people who care for the rivers, devoting their time to their conservation and upkeep (See 'Love of the river runs deep' *LANDSCOPE*, spring 2024).

Those working towards the sustainability of the rivers came together at the festival, which saw an array of engaging workshops, stalls and activities. The River Guardians program started in 2009 by the Swan River Trust as a vehicle for engaging the community around the health and protection of the rivers and is now managed by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservations and Attractions (DBCA). "The festival is a chance for the community to come down and learn more about the Swan Canning river system and all the great organisations that help protect it," DBCA's Senior Officer for Behaviour Change and Public Participation Jason Menzies said.

"People often have a misconception about how many species call the river system home. It's not just swans and ducks," Wildlife Advocacy South Perth volunteer Veronica McPhail said. "Events like this festival are great for engaging children, especially since children are the key to protecting future wildlife. "It's great for people to get involved and care for what we have already so we can leave it to the next generation."

GETTING INVOLVED

An unfortunate side effect of having humans and wildlife sharing a space is seeing wildlife in distress. "Anyone can get involved in looking after wildlife, even if you're not a volunteer," president of WA Seabird Rescue Matt Watson said. "Picking up fishing litter, such as discarded lines, hooks and bait bags, is a great place to start as this helps to reduce entanglements." WA Seabird Rescue is a volunteer-led organisation that focuses on dealing with sick and injured birds. "While there is no such thing as a typical rescue, being able to predict the behaviour of the bird is essential to the process," Matt said.

OPEN TO ALL

With 16 stalls, a live stage and workshops encompassing a variety of sustainable subjects, the festival was open to all members of the community. There were interactive workshops for the children, including building native bee hotels, as well as practical demonstrations for the adults, such as what to do when a bird is entangled in a fishing line.

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Main top View of Perth City from the Swan River.
Main below Many dolphins call the riverpark home.
Inset Fun activities at the Festival.
Photos – DBCA
Above 1) Panelists at the festival.
2) Natasha Bowden showing the SERCUL catchment model. **3)** Wildlife Advocacy stall.
4) Cockatoos at the Carnaby's Crusaders stall.
5) Kids activities at the festival.
Photos – DBCA



Discover more about the River Guardians Festival

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.



“Putting in a second bird bath, building a frog hotel or planting native plants are all ways people can be conservation conscious from home.”

When the birds are injured and vulnerable, they will be very nervous, so they'll be flighty.

Having a range of specialised equipment helps with the rescues, even if it's using a kayak to gently guide a swan to shore. The rescued birds are then taken to a vet for further treatment.

Another focus at the festival was bringing nature back into Perth gardens. Josh Byrne, from 'Our Gardens, with Josh Byrne' (see 'Down the garden path' *LANDSCOPE*, autumn 2024) held a workshop on 'river wise' gardening practices.

The workshop focused on educating the gardening community about the impacts garden practices can have on the health of the river system, as the fertiliser runoff ends up in the stormwater drains and then deposits into the rivers.

Panel sessions held on the main stage continued this topic. Discussions ranged from backyard and neighbourhood-scale greening initiatives to what can be done at a broader landscape and city scale.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE

South East Regional Centre for Urban Land Care (SERCUL) Education and Promotion Manager Natasha Bowden said festivals are great for attracting audiences who wouldn't necessarily come to a standalone event.

“A lot of people that come to standalone events have a passion for that particular topic,” Natasha said.

“But here, you might get people who wander in who have no idea about the impacts of the fertiliser they put on their lawn, on the river.”

Natasha said she hoped people would leave the festival with increased knowledge of riverwise gardening.

“It's important people know that anything that goes down the drains is going to end up in your local wetland or river. Sharing this information is a step towards successfully reducing the nutrient load of the river.”

DBCAs Principal Scientist for Rivers and Estuary Science Dr Kerry Trayler said it's this abundance of nutrients in the rivers that causes algal blooms and fish kills.

While the rivers have faced some challenges, the Swan Canning Riverpark is still healthy and able to be enjoyed by the community.

“We've got quite a number of spaces that are natural shorelines,” Dr Trayler said.

“To compare that with places like the Thames or Sydney, you will know how beautiful our waterway is.”

A program of the Perth Natural Resource Management (NRM) agency, ReWild Perth, follows along with this initiative. ReWild Perth is focused on encouraging people to bring nature back into their outdoor spaces.

“I want people to see that it doesn't matter how small an action it is; every action helps,” Perth NRM Stakeholder Engagement Manager Ingrid Sieler said.

Putting in a second bird bath, building a frog hotel or planting native plants are all ways people can be conservation conscious from home.

“Empowering people to know they can make a difference is essential for giving hope to the community.”

Alongside the enjoyment of the rivers comes a collective responsibility to ensure they continue to flourish.

Above left Dolphin Watch FinBook.

Inset above Volunteer Sue Harper, Education Officer Naomi Adamczyk and researcher Dr Delphine Chabanne.

Above Josh Byrne presenting for ABC Radio Perth.

Photos – DBCA

Become a River Guardian

Whether you're interested in river history, dolphins, birds, insects, water quality, oxygenation and other scientific issues, or simply just want to know more about our beautiful Swan Canning Riverpark and how to help protect it, River Guardians has a variety of different projects that may be of interest to you. Visit riverguardians.com for more information.



Hannah Beaney recently completed an undergraduate degree at Curtin University receiving a Bachelor of Communications.