

THE HILLS FOREST

THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

HILLS FOREST





Do you enjoy
abseiling, canoeing or
bush art courses,
Aboriginal Dreaming
performances or unique
Clydesdale and llama
tours? Well, all are
on offer at The Hills Forest.
Established in 1992, the
project was designed to
encourage people to visit the
forest. Five years later, it has
become a powerhouse of
activity, with more than
16 500 people enjoying its
delights each year.
Whether for school students,
adventurous individuals or
interested seniors, The Hills
Forest has something for
everyone.

**Kate Baxter
and
Stev Slavin**

Jarraah-morri forest.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/
Lochman Transparencies

Inset top:
Exploring forest
values
Photo – Barry Hooper

Inset centre:
Forest-inspired creativity.
Photo – Paula Wood

Inset bottom:
Education is fun.
Photo – Liz Moore



Just forty minutes' drive from central Perth, nestled amid tall gums

and jarrah forest, is the Hills Forest Activity Centre. This peaceful setting near Mundaring Weir belies the hive of activity found in the centre. Cottages salvaged from the Gnangara Pine Plantation have been tastefully remodelled into a purpose-built Information, Office and Resource Centre, with a beautiful courtyard and rammed earth amphitheatre.

The Hills Forest Project, which celebrates its fifth birthday this year, is not just a picnic destination in thousands of hectares of magnificent jarrah and wandoo forest with a few recreational facilities. It is an important focus of high quality, low cost, year-round activity programs that reach out to the young and old alike.

The recipe for The Hills Forest was pretty simple: combine a large expanse of beautiful jarrah forest close to Perth with fun, cheap, family recreation in the outdoors; blend with interesting learning opportunities about the forest; and simmer for five years—constantly checking the needs and wants of participants.

Although the original project made use of models from Canada and the eastern States, it is a first for Western Australia. Its parameters have been widened considerably since the original concept was proposed, and this process continues as new opportunities develop.

The pilot scheme for an outdoor activities program entitled *Go Bush!* ran in Spring 1991, with 300 adults and children participating in 10 activities. The next year saw 560 people attend 28 activities and last year more than 16 500 people attended 483 activities. The purpose of these activities remains the same; they offer a choice designed to bring people to the forest, to enjoy its plants and animals, and to raise awareness and understanding of the values of our forests and how they are managed.

ACTIVITY PROGRAMS

The focus of the program may not have changed, but the variety of different activities it offers has expanded enormously during



Right: The great outdoors is nature's own classroom.

Below right: The Hills Forest Activity Centre is at the heart of the project.

Photos — Stev Slavin



the years. The recent *Go Bush!* program boasted more than thirty half-day and full-day activities. Families joined CALM staff and other experts on forest walks to seek out marsupials, birds, frogs, spiders and insects, or to take part in numbat tracking expeditions. They also took part in

Operation Foxglove—CALM's forest fox-baiting program—by checking out survey traps to monitor the increase in numbers of threatened mammals such as bandicoots, chuditch, phascogales and dunnarts, all of which are making a welcome comeback in Perth's hills.

The forest by night is a different and special place, full of movement, sights and sounds that welcome even the most wary visitor. All year round, The Hills Forest offers night walks with experienced leaders who help unravel the mysteries of the bush and its plants, flowers, insects and other animals. Such activities might focus on the fascinating life of the owl, while others give an introduction to the specialised field of bat detection, where participants learn about mist nets and use ultrasound to 'see' the bats' echolocating calls.

Bush arts and crafts feature strongly in the *Go Bush!* program. Local experts lead group activities such as drawing in pastels, bush cooking, photography, paper making, book binding, basketry and clay work.

Bush walks, with a difference, include strolling through WA's only railway tunnel in John Forrest National



Park, along Mundaring Weir with Water Corporation staff, or through the bush with llamas carrying light refreshments. Bushcraft courses provide information about local edible native plants and hands-on sessions in traditional fire lighting, string making and modern survival kits. And the bush picture would not be complete without an introductory course to Nyoongar Aboriginal culture and heritage, with songs and dances and the manufacture of traditional implements.

Every spring and autumn, another diversification of The Hills Forest activities program is run. *Go Bush Gets Adventurous!* is aimed at the more daring forest visitor. The series offers introductions to four-wheel-driving, abseiling and rock-climbing, canoeing and orienteering, as well as a number of guided mountain bike rides by day and night. More unusual perspectives of the forest, coupled with some spectacular views, are available on the back of a camel or behind a Clydesdale horse on a tranquil wagon ride through the bush.

For those who want to keep their feet firmly planted on the ground, the Bibbulmun Track awaits (see 'Building

a Better Bibbulmun Track', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1997). Here, visitors can opt for a one-day walk to improve their bush walking skills, or a three-day weekend away on an exciting and energetic 40-kilometre hike using new campsite facilities. For those planning a more extended trip down south, Jesse Brampton, CALM's Bibbulmun Track Coordinator, will discuss the track's facilities, campsites and markers, as well as the necessary—and unnecessary—gear for the trip at a fascinating briefing evening.

Not content with a greatly expanded *Go Bush!* program, the team at The Hills Forest has come up with some fantastic summer evening information and entertainment sessions. Most of these are held in the rammed earth amphitheatre, and the *Sights and Sounds of the Night* program has become renowned for its Aboriginal Dreaming performances of music and dance, yarn spinning evenings and bush bands.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

The innovative commitment to a series of educational programs for school students continues strongly, but has not been without heartache. The different approach towards the learning process

was initially met with some mistrust and indifference as it was working against convention. However, the growth in attendance has been phenomenal. The first year saw only 600 students pass through the program, but last year more than 6 500 students and adults took part.

Several new educational programs are being developed. From one successful series run over the past four years, *Discovering The Hills Forest* has now become five separate one-day excursions that link with the curriculum and pre-visit classroom activities for Years 3 to 7. Children 'discover' the forest ecosystem, Aboriginal culture and threatened species, with the emphasis on responsible use of forest resources and how to take action to lessen environmental impact caused by humans.

A combination excursion, set up in conjunction with the WA Water Corporation staff and called the Catchment Carers' Trail, has also had an incredibly

successful first year. Nearly 4 500 students and adults participated in this interactive walk trail, which focuses on issues such as salinity, erosion, nature conservation and water cycle.

The annual 'Forest Walk'—held in late winter when the forest is at its best, with water courses cascading, wildflowers in bloom and plenty of wildlife to see—and other special events have helped to raise public awareness of the possibilities and facilities that exist in the forest so close to Perth.

The first 'Native Animal Encounters Day' was held in June last year. It was such a success, with nearly 1 000 adults and children attending, that it will be repeated this year. The opportunity to look, listen and learn about a huge variety of native animals—birds, reptiles, insects and mammals, including the rarely seen

chuditch and numbat—was extremely attractive to many families.

Experienced wildlife carers and CALM staff were available for questions at information points, and everyone had the opportunity to get close to animals that they may have heard about, but never seen.

Below left: Close encounters of a bush kind.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

Below right: Quiet moments and places for lunch.
Photo – Stev Slavin



THE NEXT FIVE YEARS



The positive feeling within The Hills Forest Project is much the same as five years ago, with new windows of opportunity opening. As the activity programs have developed, expanded and diversified, marked increases in attendance have continued and new markets are constantly being sourced. Increasing numbers of international tourists are to be found at Aboriginal Dreaming performances in the amphitheatre on warm summer nights; more and more school children have sat in the best classroom of all—the great outdoors; and as recovery plans for threatened species come to fruition, so The Hills Forest offers greater access to everyone to enjoy high quality hands-on experiences with native animals.

The first campsite in Western Australia specifically designed to cater for people with disabilities is nearing completion in The Hills Forest, and boasts easy access to some spectacular views of the Mundaring Weir. Other campsites in The Hills Forest include Paten's Brook, which, with its pleasant three-kilometre walk, has already been enjoyed by many scout, guide, ranger and community groups for its privacy and seclusion.

A threatened flora garden has been established and, with community involvement, hides have been built to monitor the beneficial effects of *Operation Foxglove*. Plans are afoot for a demonstration softwood mill to be established near the Activity Centre.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Constant monitoring of visitors to The Hills Forest and participants in activity programs means that the project is still very much market driven, with a strong emphasis on being responsive to visitor's needs and wishes. A flexible approach to the project also means that The Hills Forest has been able to take advantage of offers made by the community to become a part of their own special events.

A perfect example of this was CALM's involvement with the Mundaring Arts Centre's Forest Phoenix fire sculpture late last winter, when a ten-metre-tall statue was set alight in spectacular fashion amidst music and singing from local choirs. More than two hundred adults and children were involved in the spectacular performance, which attracted an audience of nearly 2 000.

Once again reflecting the innovative approach that The Hills Forest Project has taken over the past five years, an outdoor cinema has been set up on land leased from CALM.

An enriching component of the activities and an invaluable source of information is the dedicated team of volunteers, who are incredibly active and supportive of the project. They help in ways too many to mention to ensure the smooth running of activity programs and special events. Like the activities themselves, volunteer numbers have grown many times over since the project first began (from 18 to 105) and many of the original intake are



Above left: Trained volunteers make it all possible.

Photo – Stev Slavin

Left: The Hills Forest is fully accessible to all.

Photo – Larisa Vanstien



still active in their work. The youngest is a 16-year-old student, the oldest has just turned 80. The Hills Forest volunteers come from all walks of life. They all share a great sense of fun and humour, a common desire to be with people and to get out and enjoy the bush.

Like everyone involved in The Hills Forest project, it's the intense look of concentration, fascination and sometimes disbelief on peoples' faces when they encounter some new experience that keeps the volunteers coming back. It's the constant fun of acquiring new skills and knowledge. It's those impossible-to-repeat moments when the kookaburra laughs between songs in the amphitheatre . . . the smell of the forest after the first rains . . . or the inquiry about whether or not paper is made during the activity entitled Paper-Making!

In The Hills Forest, imagination is still the only limit!



Above left: Aboriginal Dreaming — a favourite event in the summer program.
Photo — Kevin Wilson

Left: Ancient granite holders are a feature of the Darling Range.
Photo — Stev Slavin

Below left: The Forest Walk attracted many families keen to learn about the forest.
Photo — Barry Hooper

Below: Chuditch, the special mascot of the project.
Photo — Jiri Lochman

Stev Slavin is manager of The Hills Forest and Kate Baxter is the marketing and promotions officer. Both can be contacted on (08) 9295 3149.



LANDSCOPE

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Noisy scrub-birds are rare in museum collections. This one, from a Dutch Museum, was probably collected by John Gilbert. See page 36.



Mount Bakewell looms over the old town of York, but it is more than just a prominent landmark. Find out why on page 42.



This year, The Hills Forest celebrates its fifth birthday. Find out what's been happening there in our story on page 10.



The Kimberley region of Western Australia has some weird and wonderful landforms. Read all about them on page 16.



The northern quoll is just one of WA's marsupials that have been part of a recent conservation status review. See page 22.

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COVER

Get down on the ground, scramble through the leaf litter and compost in your garden, and discover the fascinating world of insects. 'Insects in the Garden', on page 28, shows how these seemingly insignificant creatures help keep the ecosystem running smoothly and how they are a vital part of nature's life-cycle.

Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky



Managing Editor: Ron Kawalilak
Editor: David Gough
Story Editors: Ray Bailey, Verna Costello, Mitzi Vance, Mandy Clews, Carolyn Thomson
Scientific/technical advice: Andrew Burbidge, Ian Abbott, Paul Jones, Tony Start, Neil Burrows and staff of CALM's Science & Information Division
Design and production: Maria Duthie, Sue Marais
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Illustrations: Gooitzen van der Meer, Ian Dickinson
Cartography: Promaco Geodraft
Marketing: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (08) 9334 0296 Fax: (08) 9334 0498
Subscription enquiries: ☎ (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437
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