

PARTNERSHIP TO SEEK CURES FROM WA PLANTS

An agreement signed in November has marked the beginning of the largest scientific search yet undertaken in Australia for new medicines derived from Western Australian plants.

A Perth company, Bio-Gene Bioprospecting Limited, plans to test plant extracts for a range of therapeutic activities in their Perth laboratory, and to supply other drug-discovery companies with samples for further testing.

Chemical compounds produced by plants are still a major source of pharmaceuticals as well as veterinary and agricultural chemicals. Taxol, from yew trees in the USA, for example, is currently used as a treatment for breast cancer, and conocurvone, from a WA smokebush, is still under development as a possible treatment for the AIDS virus.

CALM, the co-signatory with Bio-Gene Bioprospecting, will collect plant samples from Crown land, under the licence agreement. The initial samples for the project will come from a plant extract library prepared by CALM and the Chemistry Centre (WA) to attract commercial interest in Western Australian plants.

Bio-Gene is the successful respondent to CALM's call for expressions of interest in accessing the plant extract library and any future collections. Eleven responses were received from around the world. Bio-Gene was assessed as offering greater benefits to the State.

The company plans to invest about \$40 million over the next five years to equip its screening facilities



Bio-Gene will test plant samples for possible use in veterinary medicine, as well as for human medical needs, and agrochemicals. Plant specimens will be collected only under the supervision of experienced CALM botanists. They will ensure that any gathering of the small amount of material required will not adversely affect habitats and plant populations.

It is expected that the partnership will see significant funds being earned for conservation purposes.

and employ scientific, technical and administrative staff.

It is expected that the creation of new job opportunities for people by the company will help to reverse the trend that has seen similarly valuable human resources looking elsewhere for employment.

Under the CALM/Bio-Gene licence agreement, the company will pay a fee for each sample provided, as well as a percentage of all revenue earned from other companies seeking access to the samples, plus a royalty on the sale of the products derived from the samples.

Funds received will be used to boost plant conservation and research, in the same way that the \$1.65 million received to date from the smokebush project has contributed to a range of nature conservation projects.

The CALM/Bio-Gene agreement will not prevent others from applying for permits to collect plants, including those wanting to pick wildflowers commercially, academics wanting to further their research, and Aboriginal people wanting to use plants for traditional purposes.

Above: WA wildflowers—how many cures lie among them for what ails humans and animals?

Photo – Ann Storrie

Below: Bio-Gene Bioprospecting Ltd board members join Environment Minister Cheryl Edwards (centre front) and CALM Executive Director Dr Syd Shea (left rear) to sign the agreement. They are (rear) Messrs Greg Eaton, Max Kay and Kevin Rumble; (front) Ms Elizabeth Eaton, and Chief Executive Officer, Mr John Hodder.

Photo – Craig Stewart



Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

LANDSCOPE

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How many seals or sea lions are there around WA's coasts? See 'A Tale of Two Seals' on page 42.



Enjoy the WA environment—and don't get hurt! See 'Balancing Act' on page 23.



"What I wasn't prepared for was the magic of the experience." See 'Desert Impressions' on page 35 for the story of a LANDSCOPE Expedition.



The malleefowl has declined to 46 per cent of its former range. Read about the combined effort to save it on page 17.



Traditional owners are working with CALM and other agencies to manage the land. See page 10.

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The white-breasted sea-eagle is one of the many natural attractions of the mid-west. See page 28 for a story on one of the region's most famous places—beautiful Kalbarri National Park.

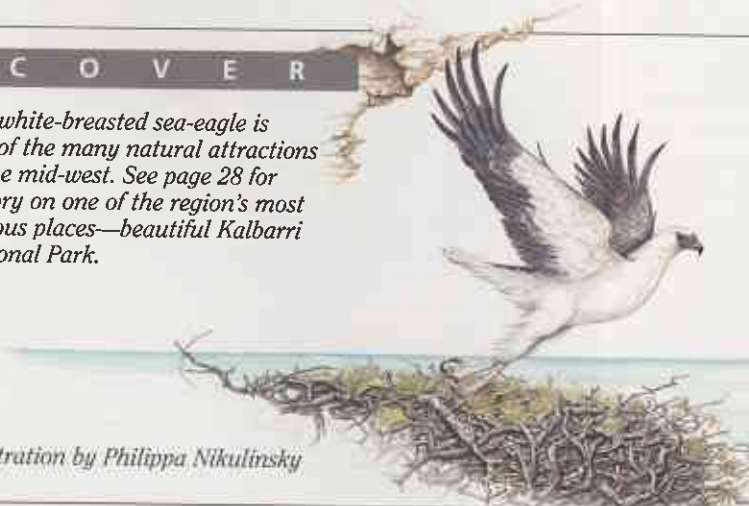


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