



Getting nearer to nature



One of the leading nature-based interpretation programs in and around Perth is the Department of Conservation and Land Management's (CALM's) 'Nearer to Nature', which built on the successes of the 'Go Bush!' and 'Perth Outdoors' programs that began in the late 1980s.

by Darren Gillespie



Nearer to Nature

Most Western Australians love escaping to the outdoors to experience all that our natural environment has to offer, whether it's to serene forests, lakes and wetlands buzzing with life, coastal woodlands echoing with the calls of cockatoos, or picturesque marine parks. These experiences link us with natural ecosystems and help us to unwind and refresh from the busy daily schedules of our lives.

While many of Perth's residents and visitors travel for hours down south and to other distant and often remote places north and east to enjoy these

settings, more and more people are realising they can also have wonderful nature experiences right on their doorsteps, in the metropolitan area.

Born in the hills and growing

In the late 1980s, CALM launched the 'Go Bush!' program, which operated solely in the hills east of Perth. The Hills Forest Discovery Centre was created near Mundaring to provide a venue for many Go Bush! activities, with programs also taking place in nearby areas such as John Forrest National Park.

Activities were designed to excite

and intrigue people by presenting nature in a vibrant and colourful way, and by giving them the opportunity to get 'hands-on' with native wildflowers and wildlife. The program quickly developed a strong following and a reputation as an innovator in nature-based interpretive activities.

In 2001, with many years of successful hills-based programs under its belt, the time was ripe to take nature activities to the Perth coastal plain and introduce residents to natural areas near where they lived, worked and played. The expanded program, named 'Nearer to Nature', aimed to connect people of all ages to natural ecosystems.

Nearer to Nature

Modern life has become fairly detached from nature, but, thankfully, many areas in and around Perth have retained vigorous ecosystems. These urban natural areas are vital to the future health of our society.

Like its predecessors, Nearer to Nature uses guided activities and knowledgeable guides to provide information, storytelling and experiences, and to create opportunities for people to become familiar with or develop a greater understanding of natural environments near where they live. During the past three years, the program has introduced many thousands of people to a much wider range of experiences and environments, from the hills to the coastal plain and ocean beyond.



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Main A group enjoys a reptile activity in the scenic Herdsman Lake Regional Park.

Above far left Native animal encounters are enthralling experiences for people of all ages.

Photos – Michael James/CALM

Above left Joeys and other native animals feature regularly in Nearer to Nature activities.

Photo – Tony Natthan/CALM

Left Koodah Cornwall displays traditional Nyoongar tools.

Photo – Jiri Lochman/CALM



Above Nearer to Nature guide, Jacqi Purvis, points out features of flowering plants.

Right Nature experiences are provided for children as young as three years old. Photos – Michael James/CALM

Seasons in nature

Each year, the Nearer to Nature team develops four seasonal activity programs. Each starts near the beginning of a school holiday period and runs for about six weeks. The programs have something for everyone, with activities specifically for children, families and adults to help create an increased desire in the community to care for urban nature, and to introduce people to the benefits of recreation in these areas without causing negative environmental effects.

For the community to be interested in the long-term conservation of urban nature, they must value natural areas and see them as important to their own health and lifestyle. One way to achieve this is to introduce people to local reserves and encourage them to have fun exploring and discovering the delights of each area.



Activities are run as far north as Yanchep National Park, south to Creery Wetlands Nature Reserve near Mandurah, and east to the forests around Mundaring. They take place in four different environment types: forest, wetland, woodland and marine. Hence, the Nearer to Nature logo has four animal icons representing each environment type (a chuditch for the forest, a cockatoo to symbolise woodland, a sea star from the marine environment and a frog to portray wetlands).

Nearer to Nature's sense of fun is evident in the names of its activities: 'Polywogs in Pools', 'Bush Treasure', 'Walk on Water', 'Forest Fairies and Gumnut Gnomes', 'Mud to Memento' and 'Microcosmic Monsters' are among the activities to have been offered over the years. A variety of recreational pursuits for the body and mind are incorporated into each seasonal program. For example, participants can canoe hidden sections of our rivers, cycle the Munda Bididi Trail, create nature-inspired craft using natural and



recycled materials and walk a variety of tracks and trails.

One of the most popular and enduring activities is 'Nightshift'. This involves a guided spotlighting walk followed by close encounters with marsupials and other forest animals, while a professional wildlife carer imparts intriguing and fascinating tales of the animals' remarkable traits. The opportunity to touch, pat and hold these animals thrills young and old alike.

Environments to explore

Perth's eight regional parks are a major focus of the Nearer to Nature activities. These areas, managed by CALM's Regional Parks Unit, contain facilities such as environmental and visitor centres, boardwalks, walktrails, recreation areas and interpretive signs. Regional parks in the metropolitan area are mostly in woodland and wetland environments and are surprisingly rich in native wildflowers and wildlife. For example, many residents would be amazed to discover that birds from Siberia migrate to wetlands in Perth's southern suburbs during the northern winter.

The Nearer to Nature team is also working with the City of Stirling to coordinate activities at Star Swamp Reserve in North Beach. The Henderson Environmental Centre is a wonderful base from which to explore this reserve.

Two important marine parks—Marmion Marine Park, adjacent to the northern suburbs, and Shoalwater Islands Marine Park, in the south near Rockingham—straddle the coast of suburban Perth, and Nearer to Nature activities in and alongside these parks



Top left Spotlighting walks through natural areas are popular activities.

Centre left Wildflower walk in the Hills Forest at Mundaring.

Left Colourful sea stars delight participants at the marine park touch pool activity.

Photos – Michael James/CALM

Right Nyoongar guide, Leonard Thorne, demonstrates the skill of throwing a kylie (boomerang).

Photo – Michael James/CALM

introduce people to the coastal and marine environment. Activities such as the 'Stars of the Sea' touch pool allow people to see and feel sea stars, sea urchins and other plants and animals of the reef. This activity is an effective way to demonstrate the importance and fragility of the marine ecosystems on our doorstep.

The program will continue to expand and reach new areas. This is important as people often begin by joining in activities near their home. Once they become familiar with the activities and fun to be had in nature, they are enticed to explore and appreciate environments further away from where they live.

Something for all seasons

There is always something going on in nature, whatever time of year, and activities are scheduled so people can experience it all. Because there is a range of natural locations to explore, the best can be made of all seasons. Nearer to Nature's summer activities focus on Perth's marine parks, with touch pools and other coastal activities, as everyone loves the beach while the weather is warm. Of course, the hills are beautiful on warm summer nights, so spotlighting walks, stargazing and evening activities are scheduled in summer at national parks in the Darling Scarp and at The Hills Forest Discovery Centre.

Winter is the best time to visit regional park wetlands in all their wet, rainy glory. Activities are planned to make full use of this great time of year when frogs abound and wildflowers and wildlife thrive. Spring is ideal for a walk or ride in the Perth hills. Water is still running in some areas, wildflowers are blooming and animals are active after the colder winter months. Nearer to Nature's spring programs offer forest rides and walks of various lengths and



topics to make full use of this time of year.

Activities have been run at all times of the day and night, from early morning birdwatching walks through wetlands and forests, to spotlighting walks and stargazing from the hills at night. Time is also taken, during some activities, to simply relax and enjoy tranquil surrounds.

Cultural heritage

Another facet of experiences offered by Nearer to Nature is Nyoongar heritage and its connection with the environment. A spiritual connection with and respect for the land is an important foundation of Nyoongar culture. Many aspects of

indigenous culture are relevant to the ethos of Nearer to Nature. Nyoongar people respect the land and the animals that inhabit it, and developed lifestyles to conserve resources. These ancient practices are still relevant to modern life, with natural resources limited and under pressure from increasing urban population.

Nyoongar guides present Nearer to Nature activities that acquaint people with the values and practices of Nyoongar culture. For example, Nyoongar society recognised six seasons, which they used to plan their movements (see 'Hunters and Gatherers', *LANDSCOPE*, Spring 1992). Different food sources became available at different times of the year,



Top Two boys meet a quokka under the supervision of a registered carer.



Above A school group discusses features of Marmion Marine Park before their activity.

Top right An opportunity to rest and talk about low impact cycling along the Munda Biddi Trail.
Photos – Michael James/CALM

and life was more comfortable in certain places. Nearer to Nature's 'Six Seasons Walk' outlines this system and what each season meant to Nyoongar people. Other activities include ancient tool making, bush tucker, traditional stories, and cultural dance and singing. Activities have been developed for people of all ages, with children as



young as three learning about traditional Nyoongar culture.

European heritage is also inextricably linked to WA's environment. John Forrest National Park is the State's oldest national park and contains its only rail tunnel. Nearer to Nature's guided history walks include descriptions of the park's long history as a favourite picnic and relaxation destination, and tales relating to the construction and operation of a rail line to the Darling Range. Whether it is suburban regional parks, or the historic Mundaring Weir precinct close to The Hills Forest Discovery Centre, all of Perth's natural areas have stories that relate to European values and use of the area during the last 175 years.

Customised programs

Nearer to Nature offers much more than just the seasonal activity programs. A group booking service allows people to organise a natural experience to suit their particular interests and needs. Many charity and youth organisations, businesses, sporting and social clubs and tourism groups use Nearer to Nature to experience WA's biodiversity in a range of settings at different times of the day, week and year.

Nearer to Nature runs a marine education program specifically for schools, with a number of curriculum-linked activities. Forest camping is also available, with a universal access

campsite at The Hills Forest Discovery Centre in Mundaring. Many groups and families link their campout with a Nearer to Nature activity to make the most of their forest experience.

Where to from here?

Nearer to Nature has come a long way since its origins in the hills. Now, everyone in Perth lives reasonably close to an area where they can participate in a Nearer to Nature activity and discover native wildflowers and wildlife in their neighbourhood. New activities are continuously being created and new venues listed in the activity program. Look out for Nearer to Nature activities coming to a natural area near you.

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For further information on Nearer to Nature phone (08) 9295 2244 or visit www.naturebase.net/n2n.html.

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