



Names have changed from the 'Hills Forest Discovery Centre' to the 'Perth Hills National Parks Centre' and 'Go Bush' to '*Nearer to Nature*' but the message of the initiative remains the same: 'Encourage members of the public to explore, learn about and enjoy Perth's unique ecosystems in a fun and interactive way'. With about 55,000 visitors to the centre last year, it seems this message is being heard loud and clear!

The Department of Environment and Conservation's (DEC's) Perth Hills National Parks Centre is nestled in the forest near Mundaring Weir, 40 minutes drive from Perth. It has

three main functions: to develop and provide environmental interpretation *Nearer to Nature* activity programs; to provide schools with nature-based *EcoEducation* programs; and to operate a seven-day-a-week visitor centre providing information about recreation and nature-based tourism opportunities in the Perth hills.

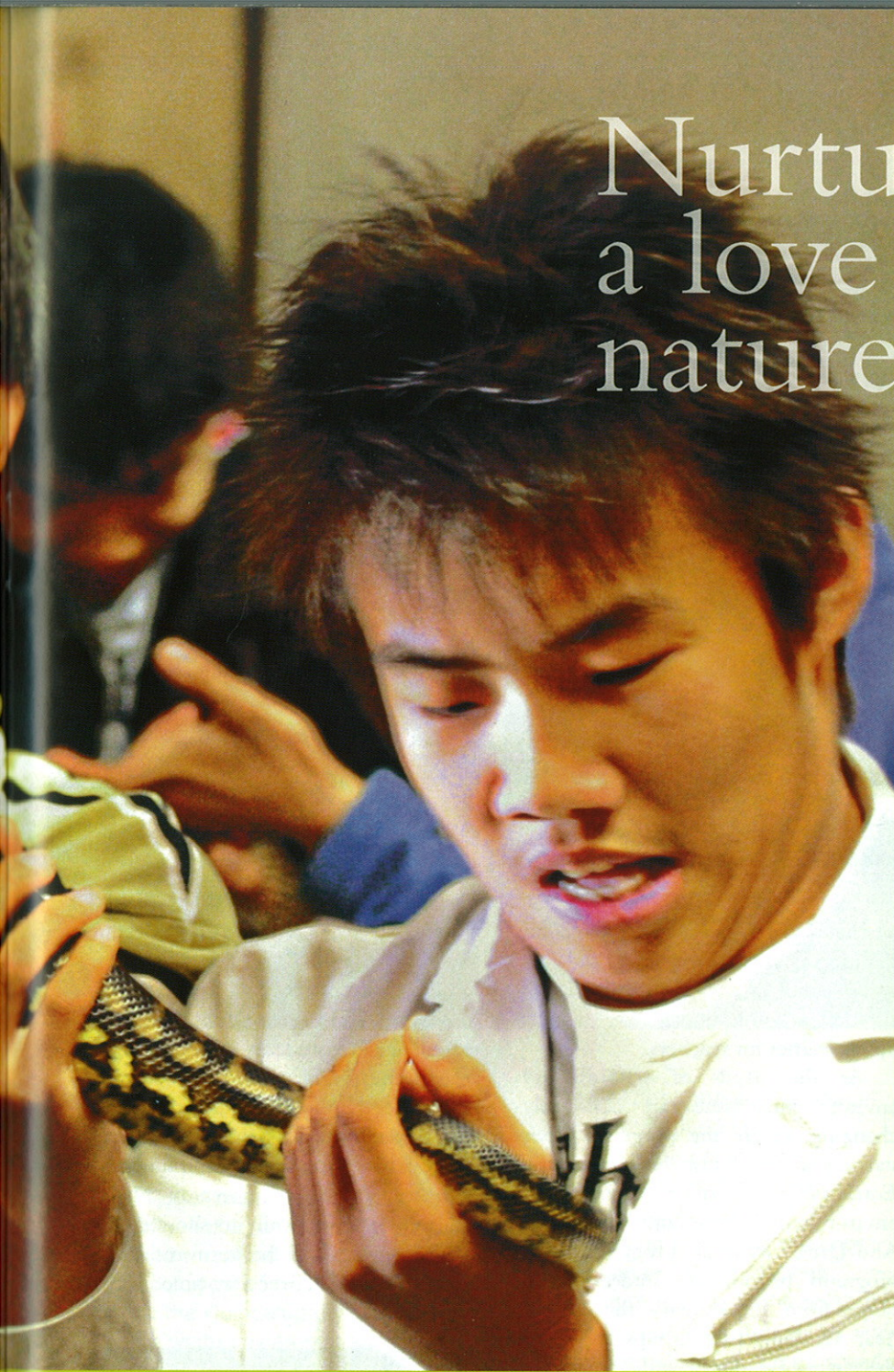
Over the years, visitor numbers to the centre have grown. In its first year, 1992, the centre received 300 visits, by 1997 visitor numbers had grown to more than 16,500 people and in 2006 visitation had grown to 55,000. These numbers included a range of people who visited the centre to take

part in programs, find information and use recreational facilities around the centre.

Visitor information

With the number of national parks within the Perth hills growing from five to 10 in the past seven years under the State Government's *Protecting our old-growth forests* policy, it became important to provide a seven-day-a-week recreational information service. As a result, the Perth Hills National Parks Centre's visitor information building was opened in April 2007.

The centre is the hub of the national parks in the area and showcases the



Nurturing a love of nature

The Perth Hills National Parks Centre, located 40 minutes drive from Perth, has become a popular site for visitors of all ages to retreat into the bush and enjoy a range of facilities and nature-based experiences. As we look back on its progress during 15 years of operation, exciting opportunities also present for the future.

by Brenda Smith,
Marie Milagro and
Stephen Crane

Above *Nearer to Nature* enables you to get up close to nature.

Photo – Blanca Garcia

on experiences increase understanding of nature which in turn increases community commitment to the long-term conservation of urban nature.

Now held in national parks, regional parks and marine parks, the program is able to focus on the fascinating variety of ecosystems across Perth. It has spread from the forests of the Perth hills to WA's beautiful coastline, which offers a plethora of possibilities for marine-based activities. Previously only snorkellers or scuba divers could

Perth hills using a variety of interpretive displays. International visitors and locals alike often return time after time to experience the forest ecosystem which surrounds the centre. Opportunities to hike or ride the numerous walk and mountain bike trails are abundant and staff at the centre are equipped to provide information on the many recreational opportunities in the area.

Nature-based activities

Fifteen years after its inception, the *Nearer to Nature* program continues to deliver innovative, nature-based activities which encourage the community to enjoy and appreciate

Western Australia's natural heritage. Initially, activities were based solely at the Perth Hills National Parks Centre but, due to its success, in 2001 the program was expanded to offer experiences to a wider audience at other locations around Perth. It was then that the name changed from 'Go Bush' to *Nearer to Nature*. The change reflected the aim to connect people to a variety of natural ecosystems and not just the jarrah and marri forests. *Nearer to Nature* activities are designed to excite and intrigue people about nature by presenting often complicated concepts in a vibrant and simple manner. The program's hands-



Above Students take part in *EcoEducation's* Forest Detective Trail. Photo – DEC

Above right People of all ages enjoy *Nearer to Nature* programs. Photo – Brenda Smith/DEC

Below right Learning about nature on the coast. Photo – DEC



view WA's underwater world without going to an aquarium but now *Nearer to Nature* provides opportunities to touch and feel varieties of algae, sea stars, seagrasses and other marine life, thereby increasing appreciation of this remarkable marine environment. The riverine environment is not forgotten, with activities along the Swan and Canning rivers held during the year.

Education programs

DEC's *EcoEducation* program for schools delivers environmental education programs to teachers and students at locations throughout WA. The programs take students from the classroom, place them in a natural setting and teach them in a fun and informative way about natural ecosystems and the environment. Importantly, *EcoEducation* strikes the balance between strong curriculum links, adherence to guidelines set out

by the Department of Education and Training and ensuring the students enjoy hands-on, relevant activities. It also offers professional development opportunities for teachers.

As the needs of schools and environmental issues are constantly changing, so are the programs. After starting with a just few programs, *EcoEducation* now offers 14 environmental programs and five Aboriginal cultural programs. The programs provide for students who range from Pre-Primary through to Year 12. University groups also have the chance to join in with the option of professional learning activities.

The future

Fostering an ongoing appreciation and understanding of the balance that is required to conserve our natural places is vital, and this means the Perth Hills National Parks Centre has an important role to play in the future.

From incorporating interpretive material on climate change into nature-based activities, to responding to Perth's ever-changing demographics by ensuring the centre and its programs are accessible, the team at the Perth Hills National Parks Centre is constantly evolving its programs to suit future needs. The centre offers a wheelchair-accessible campsite within

40 minutes drive of Perth. The team also has visions of connecting the campsite with internet access to enable students to communicate great camping experiences to students at other sites around the world. Could it soon be possible for a group to camp in the hills, look through small cameras in burrows to see native fauna and communicate with students at campsites in New Zealand, or for a family to show their relatives in England the possum sitting next to their tent, live? Stay tuned.



Brenda Smith is the Marketing and Promotions Officer for DEC's *Nearer to Nature* program. Marie Milagro is the Manager of the Perth Hills National Parks Centre in Mundaring. Stephen Crane is Team Leader for *EcoEducation*.

For more information about the Perth Hills National Parks Centre or *Nearer to Nature*, please call (08) 9295 2244, for information about *EcoEducation* please call (08) 9295 6149 or visit www.naturebase.net.

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