







# KINDRED SPIRITS

Thousands of volunteers are registered with the Department of Environment and Conservation and contribute their time to conservation, education, science and helping visitors enjoy our national parks and reserves. And there are countless others who pitch in during times of crisis or through community-based groups.

by Joanna Moore



**A**cross the vast state of Western Australia, people contribute hundreds of thousands of hours of unpaid time to protecting and conserving the environment. Without these volunteers, many conservation and research projects, community activities and environmental education initiatives would not be possible.

As the government agency responsible for the management and protection of WA's incredible natural spaces, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) has a wide range of programs through which community members can volunteer to help in the care of our environment. There are more than 11,000 registered volunteers who help the department in the collective role of protecting and conserving our environment, 3,900 of whom actively volunteered in 2009–10.

During 2009–10, this considerable number of DEC volunteers contributed 421,000 hours in 156 different programs. These programs ranged from helping with maintenance work in a variety of national parks and other conservation reserves, to recovery programs for threatened flora



and fauna species and collecting and mounting plant specimens. Hundreds more volunteered their time as part of anti-litter initiatives.

### Helping wildlife

WA's Wildcare Helpline is staffed entirely by volunteers. Started in 2001, this helpline receives calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week from members of the public who have found injured native animals and want to be put in touch with a DEC-registered volunteer wildlife rehabilitator. About



30 volunteers on the phones link callers with dozens of wildlife carers across the state. One pair of extremely dedicated volunteers, Brian and Robyn Foley, were recognised with a Volunteer of the Year Award in 2009 for their work on the helpline. Brian and Robyn staff the helpline from Friday night to Monday morning every weekend of the year except Christmas, receiving up to 150 calls each weekend.

Another way community members support native animal welfare is through the wildlife rehabilitation program. Volunteer wildlife rehabilitators in this program attend DEC wildlife courses to learn how to care for sick, injured, diseased or abandoned animals until they

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**Main** A volunteer handraises a burrowing bettong.

*Photo - Lochman Transparencies*

**Above** Curtin University environmental biology student Josey Stewart volunteers as a Wildcare Helpline operator.

*Photo - Judith Holmes/DEC*

**Above left** The late Caleb Delamare with a peregrine falcon. Caleb was a DEC-registered wildlife rehabilitator who supported the Wildcare Helpline by rescuing and rehabilitating raptors throughout the metropolitan area. People he worked with describe him as a wonderfully dedicated man who was passionate about conservation, education and caring for birds of prey.

*Photo - Nancy Tang*

**Left** Learning how to handle and rehabilitate reptiles such as bobtail lizards is part of DEC's wildlife carers courses.

*Photo - Judith Holmes/DEC*







**Above** DEC-registered volunteer wildlife rehabilitator from the Native Animal Rescue rehabilitation centre Kelli Ellemor helps with the release of a rescued albatross to its natural habitat.  
*Photo - Peter Lambert/DEC*



**Above right** Volunteers help with the relocation of cygnets at Forrestdale Lake.  
*Photo - Sonia Chalmers/DEC*

**Right** Volunteers Phylis Robertson and Val Preston discover fungi as part of the Perth Urban Bushland Fungi project.  
*Photo - Neale Bougher/DEC*



recover and can be released into their natural environment. More than 300 wildlife carers are trained by DEC each year, who then go on to work across the state. These volunteers have a personal commitment to keeping injured native animals alive, and dedicate many hours to this often-challenging work.

### Bird lovers to the rescue

Community bird groups often pitch in when native creatures need their help. In 2009, volunteers from bird handling organisations, wildlife rehabilitation centres and other volunteer groups joined DEC staff to rescue black swan cygnets from Forrestdale Lake, near Armadale, which had dried up. The cygnets were destined to come to a sad end, unable to escape predators such as foxes due to the lack of water, and so were relocated to Loch McNess in Yanchep National Park. Volunteers were central to the rescue of these iconic animals, the official bird emblem of WA.

In another example of bird-lovers volunteering with grassroots conservation, some 350 people took

part in the Great Cocky Count in April 2010. Volunteers at Carnaby's black cockatoo roost sites across the Swan Coastal Plain counted birds as they came in to roost in order to estimate total numbers and monitor trends through time. These volunteers, and many others who regularly help with cockatoo surveys, contribute to a powerful planning tool to help conserve these beautiful and threatened birds.

### At the herbarium

The WA Herbarium also benefits significantly from the work of volunteers. In 2009, volunteers mounted 11,639 specimens and labelled 10,155 specimens at the herbarium, as well as helped with imaging specimens. They also helped audit the herbarium collection

and generally kept the Reference Herbarium running smoothly, enabling technical staff to focus on other work.

Barbara and Bob Backhouse are two individuals whose work shows particular dedication. For more than 10 years, they volunteered at the WA Herbarium and consistently contributed the most hours of any herbarium volunteer. They managed the logistic and technical aspects of the Reference Herbarium which is accessed by members of the public, community groups, universities and environmental consultants, such as those who carry out work on behalf of mining companies.

Sadly, Bob passed away in 2009 and Barbara has now changed the focus of her contribution. A mining company consultant gave a eulogy





at Bob's funeral honouring his contribution to the conservation of the state's flora, illustrating how much their work was respected in the conservation and mining communities. Barbara's contribution as one half of the remarkable team who grew the Reference Herbarium from 6,000 taxa in 1990 to 11,000 taxa by 2009 was recognised with a Volunteer of the Year Award in 2009.

**In our national parks**

Yanchep National Park has been benefiting for many years from the work of volunteer Rob Foulds. Also recognised with a Volunteer of the Year Award in 2009, Rob dedicates many hours to sharing his knowledge about caves, supervising volunteers and collecting data. At caves elsewhere in the state, such as in Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park, dozens of volunteers share their knowledge of caves with visitors on guided tours.

The allure of camping in some of WA's most spectacular natural environments has made DEC's volunteer campground host program one of its most popular and successful. Since it was launched in 1991, hundreds of people have taken part in the program. Some 420 people are registered as DEC campground hosts, with about 220 volunteer placements around the state each year. It is estimated that these people volunteered 125,875 hours during 2009-10.



**Top left** Aboriginal cultural protocol training is an important part of preparing campground hosts and honorary CALM officers for their work in national parks. Photo - Judith Holmes/DEC

**Centre left** DEC campground hosts welcome visitors to Kennedy Range National Park. Photo - Courtesy Evelyn and Gordon Cole



**Left** DEC marine conservation officer Marissa Speirs and volunteer Anna Vitenbergs with a nesting hawksbill turtle on Rosemary Island in the Dampier Archipelago. Anna has volunteered tagging turtles with DEC for 20 years. Photo - Adam Williams/DEC





These volunteers play a very important role as they are often the first point of contact for visitors to a national park. They have a wide range of duties including collecting fees and visitor statistics, providing advice, information and answering questions, monitoring site usage, cleaning facilities, transporting water and firewood and sometimes helping DEC staff with light maintenance tasks. Before taking up a position at one of the 53 sites across the state, campground hosts learn about fire awareness, first aid, Aboriginal cultural protocol and strategies for communicating pleasantly and effectively with a range of people.

Another key group of volunteers who support the work of DEC are honorary CALM officers, who have powers under the *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984*. These individuals are recommended by their representative organisation or company—such as the Bibbulmun Track Foundation, a commercial tour operator or a four-

**Above** Honorary CALM officer Ray Harris shows four-wheel drivers appropriate driving tracks in Nambung National Park.  
Photo – Courtesy Ray Harris

**Above right** Volunteers after a good day's weeding at Yanchep National Park.  
Photo – Julia Coggins/DEC

**Right** Children examine a quadrat during seagrass monitoring at Roebuck Bay, a project run with significant volunteer contribution.  
Photo – Fiona Bishop



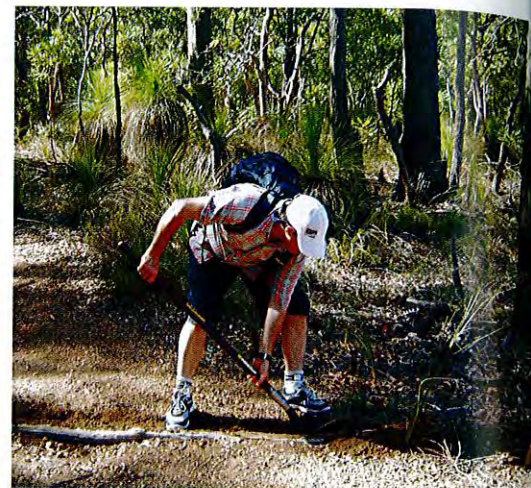
wheel-drive group—as having skills, knowledge and values which will support DEC's conservation goals and help the department do its work. Honorary CALM officers assist DEC staff and park rangers as extra eyes and ears on the ground, particularly in remote areas, and may be the only people visitors meet that can direct them or answer their queries about isolated parks or features. Thirty-three people have passed the training course run by DEC and work across WA voluntarily looking after our protected land and helping visitors safely enjoy their nature-based experience.

Throughout WA's national and marine parks and reserves, volunteers are involved in activities as diverse as dune rehabilitation, dieback treatment, western ground parrot

camp-outs, *Western Shield* surveys, water monitoring, fauna translocation, cane toad busting, turtle tagging, seed collection, flora surveys, astronomy guiding and more. As well as carrying out conservation work, community-based volunteer groups such as 'Project Numbat', the Malleefowl Preservation Group or the Gilbert's Potoroo Enclosure project often play an important role in raising funds and awareness for conservation efforts carried out or supported by DEC. Many community groups are supported by the State Government's Environmental Community Grants Program which recognises the enormous contribution community-based organisations make to protecting the state's environment and conserving the nature of WA.







### Not so alluring

Often, volunteers work in particularly unglamorous roles: for example euthanising injured animals such as kangaroos and emus when they are struck by cars on our roads, removing invasive weed species, or trapping feral goats or pigs which are causing damage in national parks. While often little-recognised, this work is a valuable contribution to conservation.

One challenging volunteer role is snake removal. Some 180 people across WA are registered as volunteer reptile removers. These brave souls are on call to safely catch and remove snakes from people's homes and backyards.

### Keeping our state clean

Not many people enjoy picking up rubbish but each year hundreds volunteer their time to do so. Keep Australia Beautiful WA (KAB WA), part of DEC, coordinates anti-litter programs to encourage people to offer their time

to keeping the environment rubbish-free. Four thousand registered litter reporters, 150 Adopt-a-Spot groups and hundreds of entrants in the Sustainable Communities Awards programs all volunteer their time on activities to reduce litter and protect the environment.

### Cadets, friends and guardians

Organisations such as Conservation Volunteers Australia, the Department of Corrective Services, the Bibbulmun Track and Munda Biddi Trail Foundations and four-wheel-drive clubs also work on a volunteer basis with DEC. Additionally, many nature reserves and marine parks have friends groups—members of a community who are particularly attached to a natural space and work together to help look after it.

Many DEC-managed regional parks are cared for by these hard-working friends groups, including Yellagonga, Woodman Point, Herdsman Lake, Piesse Brook, North Lake, Kalamunda

and many more. Often friends groups play an important educational role through sharing their knowledge about an area in talks or guided tours.

Other people play an environmental education role through volunteering with DEC's *Nearer to Nature* program or as volunteer instructors in DEC's Bush Ranger cadet program. And, of course, the students themselves volunteer considerable hours to conservation during their time as cadets.

Iconic tracks and trails managed by DEC such as the Bibbulmun Track, Munda Biddi Trail and Cape to Cape Walk Track also benefit from the passion and attention of volunteers. The work of friends groups that carry out trail maintenance and monitoring, and volunteers who 'adopt a section', provide a significant contribution towards keeping these trails safe and enjoyable for users.

Meanwhile, some people choose to turn their environmental interest into action by joining the Swan River Trust's River Guardians program, through which they help protect and restore the Swan and Canning rivers and their foreshores.



**Above** Bibbulmun Track Foundation volunteer Grayden Sambell carries out trail maintenance.

*Photo - Guy Spouge*

**Above left** Volunteer Jo Williams releases a western barred bandicoot on Bernier Island.  
*Photo - Linda Reinhold/DEC*

**Left** Volunteering can take you to beautiful locations. Here, volunteers Colin Steele and Shane Hall carry cage traps to a remote part of Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve as part of Gilbert's potoroo radio-tracking in February 2009.

*Photo - Tony Friend/DEC*





### In times of crisis

Volunteers are indispensable in crisis situations, such as marine mammal rescue. Two mass strandings of false killer whales near the south-west town of Busselton on 3 April and 2 June 2005 is testament to this (see 'Stranded!', *LANDSCOPE*, Spring 2005). At these strandings, requests for help from the community by one of DEC's predecessor departments, the Department of Conservation and Land Management, led to many hundreds of volunteers working to save the whales.

In the second stranding—a massive rescue operation involving 40 staff and some 1,500 volunteers—more than 100 whales were herded out to sea within eight hours. This was one of the most successful whale rescues ever undertaken in WA with all but one of the whales surviving. This success demonstrates the huge benefits that can be achieved through collaborations between government agencies and the community. Without those volunteers, there might have been a very different outcome on that day.

### Why volunteer?

The benefit of this massive volunteer force to the environment—and to DEC—is clear, but what do volunteers get out of volunteering? There is the camaraderie experienced through working with other people, particularly in high-pressure situations such as whale strandings. Such situations provide the chance to escape our usual routines and an opportunity to meet challenges not experienced day-to-day.

Volunteers are people who are environmentally committed and have taken a stance on their commitment

by turning it into action. They enjoy seeing the right thing done and want to help make it happen. Perhaps they get a sense of satisfaction through training their fellow four-wheel drivers to be environmentally aware—and so choose to become honorary CALM officers. Maybe they value the healthy lifestyle gained through spending time in national parks and like to help other people enjoy it. Campground hosts certainly have the luxury of being in touch with some of the best places WA has to offer.

Volunteers, such as those at the WA Herbarium, may also have an intrinsic interest in the field to which they choose to donate their time. This may be coupled with a desire to increase their knowledge and develop new skills. Volunteering sometimes provides special opportunities for people to explore their special interests or demonstrate their skills. It is also true that volunteers often bring with them knowledge and specialist experience: learning is always two-way. Some of the most experienced people, with high levels of expertise, are often hard at work, unpaid, for conservation.

Volunteering—whether in tree planting, clean-ups or guiding cave tours—is also a way for people to become actively involved with nature, rather than just enjoying passive recreation. DEC's *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* program, in partnership with KAB WA and Mentally Healthy WA's Act Belong Commit campaign, aims to get more people connecting with nature and feeling better about themselves and the world around them. The notion of 'giving something back' can be really rewarding.

The benefits of volunteering spread

**Above** Volunteers care for false killer whales during a stranding near Augusta in south-west WA in July 1986. Of 114 whales stranded, 96 were returned to the sea (see 'Saving the Whales', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 1986–87).

*Photo - Jiri Lochman*

widely through our society. Through their unpaid work, volunteers gain knowledge and new understandings of the complexities of conservation and environmental management. This then spreads throughout the wider community, raising awareness of conservation generally and leading to more sustainable behaviours. Helping others enjoy and recreate in our state's national and marine parks and reserves can also be a satisfying and meaningful experience.

The protection and conservation of the WA environment cannot be achieved alone: it is only by working as part of a greater environmental community that our conservation objectives can be reached.

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