

*Touched by nature*



# Following families traditions

For the past 23 years, ecoguide Gary Muir has run the famous WOW Wilderness EcoCruises in the heart of the Walpole Nornalup National Park and the Walpole and Nornalup Inlets Marine Park. Through his business and connection with the community, he is able to share his passion for this remarkable part of the world, which he and his family have been connected to for generations.

*by Tracy Shea*

photos supplied by Gary Muir





The Muir family is undeniably part of the fabric of the south-west. Even those who are not familiar with the pioneering family, are at least familiar with the iconic infrastructure and geographic features that bear the famous name.

The family's association with the area extends back to 1844, when Andrew and Elizabeth Muir – Gary Muir's great, great, great grandparents – moved to Western Australia from Scotland. The Muirs carried out backbreaking work in a hostile and unfamiliar landscape to develop agriculture on the south coast.

## NATURE LOVERS

While they were pioneering the landscape, the family amassed a knowledge about the local biodiversity. They also unravelled many of the issues associated with farming on this unique landscape, including some – such as the poison 1080 – that are still used in conservation and land management today. The family also developed a special relationship with the local Indigenous people and many of the Muirs could speak the local dialects of the Murrum, Minang and Bibbulmun people. This affinity with and respect for the natural environment has been passed down from generation to generation and has shaped the way the Muir family continues to carry out its business.

## NEXT GENERATION

Gary Muir was born on a remote farm on the Muir Highway surrounded by jarrah forest. During his high school years, a bushfire threatened the family farm and Gary worked alongside forestry firefighters to protect the property – marking his first interaction with the Forests Department. It was around this time that Gary made another significant connection – this time with DBCA Director General Mark Webb, who was working for the Department of Agriculture and encouraged Gary to pursue biology. Over the next few years, Gary connected with department alumni Per Christensen, Neil Burrows and Greg Mair. Initially bonded by a love of long-distance running, it was their shared interest of the natural world that influenced



Gary's decision to pursue forestry. In particular, weekly drives to running training with Per Christensen through dieback-infested areas helped Gary appreciate the interconnectedness of forest ecosystems. His passion was fostered by the science and geography teachers of Manjimup Senior High School and led to him joining the Forestry Cadet School, alongside his best friend Brad Ellis, in 1984.

## GROWING A CAREER

After completing Forestry Cadet School, Gary was posted to the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) offices in Jarrahdale and Manjimup before moving to Walpole. It was here that he helped design and develop sites significant to his family's heritage, including at Hilltop Tingle Tree, John Rate Lookout, Conspicuous Cliff, Harewood Forest Walk, Hilltop Lookout and Mandalay Beach as well as the Bibbulmun Track. A particular highlight was working on the site at Fernhook Falls, which was transformed from a gravel parking area to a completely redeveloped and interpretive day-use area, canoe launch and new camping area with huts and slow-combustion fire places.

*Previous page*

**Main** The stunning Walpole Wilderness Area.

**Inset top** Gary Muir.

**Inset left** Gary leads school groups as part of the UR Walpole EcoEducation Program.

**Inset right** Local Aboriginal men boating with the Muir family at the Nornalup Inlet in the 1900s.

*Photo – Settler footprints from Star: Muir Family: Pioneers of the South West and Eucla, Western Australia, 1844–2005.*

**Above** WOW Wilderness EcoCruises are popular among visitors to the area.

Gary took every opportunity to spend time in different parts of WA. He travelled through the State's north where he saw first-hand the potential for water-based experiences at Geikie Gorge. He also spent time with Aboriginal communities in the Top End. After Gary returned to the south coast, a chance meeting with CALM senior manager Kevin Vear led to a job as the project leader for the Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk development team. Gary spent a year working with the department's landscape architects, engineers and an environmental artist to design the magnificent new attraction.

## THE NEXT CHAPTER

Gary left the department to manage his farm and establish his own ecotourism business with his parents Ross and Marion. They began with 4WD safaris in the Walpole Nornalup National Park and then bought the two vessels operating on the Walpole and Nornalup inlets. With Gary and Ross's depth of knowledge, and their gift of the gab, what is now known



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as WOW Wilderness EcoCruises soon became legendary.

Gary’s tours are reflective of his belief that communication is one of the most important tools for effective environmental management, and he revelled in the opportunity to enhance visitors’ experiences through interpretation. He also invested time and resources into local natural and cultural heritage through ‘ecoprojects’. This resulted in WOW taking part in a five-year research project to look at the impact of fire on biodiversity following a bushfire that burnt through the Nuys Wilderness Area in 2001, which involved volunteer community members collecting the data. Then, in 2002, Gary embarked on a gruelling record-breaking attempt to run the entire Bibbulmun Track to raise money for the project. In 17 days, Gary completed the 1,000-kilometre track in harsh winter conditions. While the run took its toll on Gary physically, it boosted the resources available to research and conservation.

The same year, he received the inaugural EcoGuide of Australia Award and the 2003 Forum Advocating Cultural and Eco-Tourism (FACET) Golden Guide Award for his ecotourism and education ventures.

Gary continues to give back to the local community through the award-winning UR Walpole EcoEducation Program, which aims to involve local community, government and industry in the education of local kids. Further afield, he has been sponsored by Rotary as part of an international ambassadorial team to plan an international peace park – a partnership

between Australia and Turkey – at Gallipoli; been involved in a renewable energy project in Nicaragua, park management in St Lawrence National Park in Canada; and taken an intriguing expedition to Russia to trace the origins of some photos and papers involving Russian writer Leo Tolstoy that were found in a boatshed at Rest Point in Walpole. But that’s a story for another day!

Always up for adventure, Gary has also attempted to cross the Gobi Desert on a folding bike; kayaked from the Pacific to the Atlantic from Lake Nicaragua to the Caribbean while fending off spider monkeys, camping with jaguars, kayaking alongside crocodiles and snowboarding down a live volcano; kayaked and biked across Sweden; lived off the land while white-water kayaking through Finland; and mountain biked in the Austrian Alps. He even makes a point of camping out every Thursday night, no matter where he is in the world.

In 2017, Gary also joined a team of managers and scientists on *Project Dieback*, which led to the development of the Phyto Fighter 1,000 Dieback Boot Cleaning Station. The Phyto Fighter 1,000 was a finalist in the United Nations Environment Award in 2012 and Gary’s work in dieback contributed to him being awarded the Great Southern Development Commission’s Natural Resource Management Medal of Excellence in 2014. The PF 1,000 units, which are made by

Gary’s cousin Rob Pernich, are now being used in special protected areas in WA, Tasmania, Queensland, NSW and New Zealand.

### THOROUGHLY COMMITTED

Gary continues to be motivated by the legacy left by his forefathers. He believes that it was through the stewardship of many unsung heroes of the past, who were so moved by WA’s uniqueness, beauty, biodiversity and long natural and cultural history that they worked to influence others to conserve these natural areas.

Gary is now a Park Ambassador for the WA Parks Foundation.

“WA’s parks really are priceless, filled with so many jewels that lay hidden, and safeguarded, yet there are endless ways to explore and discover them time and time again. To share these places and their stories with friends, to me is the secret for enjoying life. This is why I love WA parks. To see these areas really change people and build their own appreciation for our wild places is amazing and will hopefully lead to us recognising we may have still more unprotected wild places to be respected and reserved,” he said.

**Above from left** Gary at the Forestry Cadet School; Gary helped develop the Tree Top Walk; Gary helped create the Phyto Fighter 1,000 Dieback Boot Cleaning Station.

*Photo – Tracy Shea/DBCA*

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