



Campground

HOSTS

an outback welcome



Visit one of Western Australia's national parks and, increasingly, chances are you'll come across special volunteers whose role it is to make your camping experience in WA truly unique.

by Lee Hollingsworth

Each year, millions of visitors traverse Western Australia's vast landscapes, exploring the State's stunning and expansive coastline, lush forests and arid deserts, often looking for their next place to set up camp. The distances between these areas can be great, so the smiling faces of the campground hosts who are there to greet visitors are often a welcome sight.

These campground hosts are members of an army of hundreds of people who give their time to support national park rangers in visitor and park management, and make it their mission to help visitors make the most out of their stay in some of WA's most iconic and spectacular areas. They are often a font of information about the places in which they're posted and are known for creating unforgettable memories for travellers.

The success of the campground host program, helps to build a greater awareness of and appreciation for the environment by creating positive visitor experiences. The volunteers also help to maintain facilities that would otherwise stretch the resources of the department.

A GROWING PROGRAM

Campground hosting in Australia began in South Australia in 1985 and was modelled on a scheme that had been successfully operating for five years in Joshua Tree National Park in California. Following SA's success, WA, the Northern Territory and Victoria all developed their own programs.

The WA Campground and Homestead Host program began in 1989 through the then Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM). It was implemented to support the work of the department by providing approved personnel at campgrounds to 'meet and greet' campers visiting Western Australian national parks.

The first volunteer campground host in WA was posted at Lane Poole Reserve near Dwellingup. And it didn't take long to see that the benefits of the program extended beyond just improving the



department's services – it enriched visitor experiences too.

By 1997, 15 national parks throughout WA were supported by 29 volunteer campground hosts. Since then, the program has significantly expanded to include ex-pastoral lease homesteads and visitor centres. In 2016–17, more than two decades after the program started, there are 65 locations throughout WA that are supported by more than 240 campground hosts. In addition, interstate arrangements have been in place since 2005, enabling WA-based campground hosts to take part in similar programs elsewhere in Australia. It is also not uncommon to find visitors from other states volunteering in WA as they make their way around the country, stopping in for stints at various parks along the way. The passion, protectiveness and pride for WA parks is strong in our resident hosts and there's always a friendly rivalry between them and those from 'over east'.

PLAYING HOST

Typically, campground hosts are people who love the natural environment, are interested in its conservation and are passionate about sharing it with visitors. They are trained by Parks and Wildlife Service staff to help department staff to deliver excellence in customer service

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Main Campers enjoying sunset at Osprey campground, Cape Range National Park.
Photo – Sally Treasure/DBCA

Below Osprey campground, Cape Range National Park.

Photo – Tourism WA

Inset top Campground hosts Neville and Joan at Kurrajong campground, Purnululu National Park.

Inset bottom Campground hosts help rangers maintain facilities.

Photos – DBCA

Above Camping at Lucky Bay, Cape Le Grand National Park.

Photo – Tourism WA

and carry out a variety of roles associated with park and visitor management in WA's world-class national park campgrounds.

They are often the first point of contact for visitors to a park and they assist Parks and Wildlife Service rangers meet and greet campers, and help them to settle in and enjoy their experience. Then the campground hosts show travellers, to their site, collect camping fees (at those sites that don't yet have online booking) and outline the camp rules and facilities. They also carry out other duties such as cleaning and maintaining facilities. In addition, they work closely with rangers



Campground hosts Rodger and Kay

This pair of ex-Queenslanders were 'recruited' to apply to become campground hosts for WA Parks and Wildlife Service by a couple of very enthusiastic existing hosts in late 2015.

"We were here to see WA and leave! Being part of the volunteer campground host family has enriched our lives by providing us with the opportunity to help rangers and other Parks and Wildlife Service staff to keep our national parks and reserves intact for the future as well as helping visitors to have great experiences and fun in them. We can live for a short time in some beautiful, magical places and interact with and learn about our wildlife and plants. And we have met some amazing people from all over the world and made new friends. In our opinion the Parks and Wildlife Service Campgrounds and Volunteer Program is the best we have ever seen in Australia. Other states should check out what WA does and adopt its programs!"

We love volunteer hosting so much that we now are registered on the Electoral Roll in WA and have WA driver's licences – we only go back east to visit!"



"... campground hosts are people who love the natural environment, are interested in its conservation and are passionate about sharing it with visitors."

to ensure and improve fire safety, and support the department to collect visitor surveys and other visitor-use data.

Many hosts return to the same parks each year and all hosts are encouraged to explore their environment in their down time, which has multiple health benefits and helps to reduce burn out. This, combined with the training they receive, means they often amass a wealth of information about the plants, animals and cultural heritage of the areas in which they host. They are also usually the go-to people for all the best fishing spots, places to view Aboriginal artwork and secret gorges and pools.

OUT OF THE ORDINARY

Hosts have been known to be involved in emergency situations from rendering basic first aid, to rescuing bogged vehicles



and even searches for missing tourists. Thanks to their training, experience and common-sense approach, these usually have a good ending. One case that demonstrated the hosts' commitment was when a tourist became lost on Bluff Knoll in Stirling Range National Park. After the search team returned without her, the host stayed up all night to maintain contact, providing advice to rescuers until she was located the following day. With stories like these, and others involving support to departmental staff during bushfires and other emergency incidents, it should come as no surprise that campground hosts are regularly nominated for Volunteer of the Year awards.



Above far left Hosts take pride in keeping facilities clean for visitors.

Above left Host Peter installing visitor safety signage at Cape Arid National Park.

Above Welcome point at Miners campground, Coalseam Conservation Park.
Photos – Susan Laughton

Inset top Campground hosts Kay and Rodger at Credo Conservation Park.
Photo – DBCA

Ranger Dan Petersen, Karijini National Park

"If it wasn't for campground hosts we simply couldn't do our jobs. The commitment from our hosts volunteering their time ensures visitors receive a warm welcome to the campground and information about the park on arrival. Campground hosts are valued members of the Karijini National Park team who all work together to enhance the visitor experience.

Dales campground in Karijini National Park is 110 kilometres from the closest town, Tom Price, and we get people turning up at all hours of the day to stay with us. We don't have a booking system because we don't have internet connection and we don't turn people away when they turn up, particularly when it's getting dark, as it's too dangerous. Our campground hosts do an amazing job running the campground, making sure our guests have a place to stay and keeping amenities up to scratch.

As rangers we are out patrolling gorges and walk trails every day, maintaining visitor facilities and sharing our knowledge of the natural values of the area to keep people safe. This is only made possible through the generosity of our wonderful campground hosts – if it wasn't for them we wouldn't have time to be out in the field.

People appreciate great service wherever they go, and national parks are no different."



Above Knox Gorge lookout, Karijini National Park.

Photo – Tourism WA

Left South Australian hosts Cazz and Roger at Cape Le Grand National Park.

Photo – Cazz Ohi



WHO, WHAT AND WHERE

Campground hosts are mostly self-sufficient, and bring their own caravan, camper trailer or tent, which they set up onsite at the park for up to three months. Campground hosting is ideal for people who love the WA bush and is popular among retirees. However, it's not exclusive to 'grey nomads', and the department is seeing more interest from younger couples taking career breaks or fitting it into periods of long service leave.



Some hosts choose to stay close to their home – within a days' drive so they can remain connected to their home and families – while others prefer more isolated locations with limited phone service and hundreds of kilometres from the nearest amenities.

With such a variety of campgrounds, ranging from the extremely remote with no running water or power, to the more local sites with a few more of the 'home comforts', there is a campground to suit the needs and desires of a variety of hosts.

Since it began, hundreds, possibly thousands, of people have taken part in the campground host program, spending time in some of WA's most beautiful spots, meeting interesting people from around the world and forming life-long memories and friendships.

PRICELESS GEMS

The value of campground hosts to the department is immeasurable, and hosts are highly regarded by rangers across the State, particularly at large and remote parks such as Karijini National Park. There, campground hosts help throughout the year as the park is more than 627,000 hectares and is one of the most visited national parks in WA. While rangers try to cover as much as possible, geographic challenges and resource limitations make it a massive undertaking so hosts provide an invaluable link between the rangers and visitors.



TRAINED TO HELP

Each November, campground hosts assemble for a workshop, which aims to gather campground hosts from across the State. The workshop is an opportunity for new and experienced hosts to share stories, tips and advice with fellow volunteers. The 2017 workshop saw more than 150 hosts hear from rangers from each region, who showcased their parks in an effort to entice hosts to spend time there in the upcoming season. Over the years, many guest speakers have been invited to the workshop, including those from the tourism industry, Keep Australia Beautiful WA, native flora and fauna experts and the always-popular talk by one of the department's wildlife officers on the illegal reptile smuggling trade.

Hosts are also offered additional training in disciplines such as bushfire awareness and Aboriginal culture.

PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING

The department regularly receives glowing feedback from travellers about the campground hosts they have come across. It is not unusual to hear tales of campground hosts going out of their way to help visitors get the most out of their stay – taking families fishing or hiking, showing them where the wildflowers are, or directing them to where to get the best photographs of extraordinary landscapes and biodiversity.

Campground hosts derive a great deal of pleasure from helping others to enjoy their holiday. They also meet new people and make new friendships with visitors,

staff and other volunteers, while spending time in the natural environment in some of the most beautiful parts of WA. Why wouldn't you want to be a campground host?

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Above left Hosts and campers enjoying a yarn and sharing stories at the end of the day.

Above Volunteer hosts at the 2017 workshop.
Photos – DBCA

Below Campground hosts provide visitors with an abundance of local information.
Photo – Susan Laughton

Getting involved

While traditional methods to advertise the program are in place, the most effective form of recruitment for the campground hosts is through word of mouth. Most prospective hosts have been visitors to national parks themselves, or have come across hosts at camp sites on their travels and like the sound of the lifestyle. Last year, 98 new hosts registered to join the program.

The Volunteers and Community Unit at Parks and Wildlife Service in Kensington coordinates the campground host program and provides training and support throughout a host's stay. Regional Parks and Wildlife staff provide local inductions, support and supervision for campground hosts while on site.

If you would like more information about the program visit www.dbca.wa.gov.au, or contact campground host coordinator Lorene Bennett in the Volunteers and Community Unit at Parks and Wildlife Service by email (community@dbca.wa.gov.au).



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