

Touched by nature

Thanks for the
60 years



On 19 February 1958, a fresh-faced 15-year-old school-leaver from Perth Modern School attended the then Public Service Commissioner's office in St Georges Terrace, Perth to collect a letter of appointment before reporting for duty at the Education Department. Sixty years later, Alex Errington reflects on a career that has achieved significant benefits for conservation.

by Tracy Shea

photos supplied by
Alex Errington

On 19 February 2018, at Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions' (DBCA) Kensington Office, a much older Alex Errington arrived for work just as he had done on more than 14,000 occasions during the intervening 60 years.

PUBLIC SECTOR SERVICE

Sixty years of service is no mean feat, and, with most recruits now starting work at an older age than they did in 1958, and, with the option of earlier retirement, it will probably be an even rarer event in the future.

But Alex is not fazed, and still has a great passion for the job that he loves and the environmental outcomes that he achieves. When he finally does retire, it will be with a deep satisfaction that he has done important work for the Western Australian community, most of it for the environment through the senior roles he has held at DBCA and its predecessor agencies.

After starting with the Education Department, Alex moved to the Public Works Department, the Public Service Board, the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), the State Ombudsman's Office, then back to CALM, which became the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), then the Department of Parks and Wildlife, and now DBCA.

Alex's duties have covered a wide range of activities including clerical, administration, industrial relations and finance. He was the inaugural Director of Administration and Finance when CALM was formed in 1985.

Alex was appointed as the Deputy State Ombudsman in 1992 and served in this senior statutory position for 10 years. But ask Alex in which activity he believes he has made the greatest contribution and without hesitation he will say that his work in the consolidation and expansion of the State's conservation estate has given him the greatest satisfaction during his working life.



"It is an area where you can achieve things and leave a legacy which will be there for future generations," he said.

CONTRIBUTION TO CONSERVATION

In 2002, through a fortunate turn of events that essentially allowed Alex to pick up where he left off with the land administration work he was involved with at CALM, the late DEC Director General Keiran McNamara asked Alex to do a complete review of all the recommendations made for the creation of conservation reserves across the State. The review was to include all of the department's management plans and was to go right back to the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) 'Green Book' and 'Red Book' recommendations for all Conservation Through Reserves Committee 'Systems' in the State (i.e. Systems 1-12) from the 1970s and 80s.

When I was a graduate working at the former Department of Conservation and Environment (a forerunner of the now Department of Water and Environment Regulation) in the early 1980s on the System 6 report (System 6 was the region around Perth including the northern and southern coastal plain and the Darling Range), Alex was an extraordinary resource at the end of a phone line for me (no emails then!) with his encyclopaedic knowledge of reserves, their tenure, history and wildlife values. Alex was then

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Main Alex was instrumental in the purchase of Mt Hart in 1992 which became King Leopold Range Conservation Park.

Insets from left King Leopold Range Conservation Park, D'Entrecasteaux, Nambung and Leeuwin-Naturaliste national parks, which Alex worked to consolidate.

Photos – Tourism WA, DBCA

Above A place for everything, and everything in its place – Alex hard at work in his office, with all the information on the many projects he works on close at hand.

Photo – Tracy Shea/DBCA

a Director at the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and he had enormous patience with me as I checked details about the many reserves and proposed reserve additions that were eventually included in the EPA System 6 Green Book and Red Book recommendations.

Once Alex had completed the review Keiran requested, he was to accelerate the implementation of these reserve recommendations, which is a job he is still doing to this day. His work has contributed enormously to the world-class parks and conservation reserve system we now have in Western Australia, and Alex can be very proud of his contribution.

Alex is currently involved in a large number of land-related projects and still gets a buzz when he negotiates the purchase of another parcel of conservation land or resolving a land tenure problem.



“His work has contributed enormously to the world-class parks and conservation reserve system we now have in Western Australia ... ”

He considers his most satisfying achievements to be the consolidation of the D’Entrecasteaux and Leeuwin-Naturaliste national parks and the Benger Swamp Nature Reserve, which were all once highly fragmented conservation areas but have now been consolidated into single reserves offering much greater protection for the landscapes and wildlife they support. Other achievements have included the land acquisition work leading to the creation of the King Leopold Range Conservation Park in the Kimberley, additions to Nambung National Park (which houses the Pinnacles) and Ellen Brook Nature Reserve, one of only two small reserves that are home to one of Australia’s most critically endangered reptiles, the western swamp tortoise.

“Clearing up the acquisition of key parcels of conservation lands throughout the State is satisfying work and requires persistence and patience,” he said.

Some of these projects have been around for decades. For example, the consolidation of D’Entrecasteaux National Park involved combining all the bits and pieces of reserved land and former pastoral leases and negotiating the purchase of private property.

“Benger Swamp in the Shire of Harvey was once 160 individual blocks

but is now just one 572-hectare reserve. It was a 40-year project,” he said.

Alex decided to keep working despite being beyond the usual retirement age because he loves what he is doing. He still wakes up on a Monday morning and thinks: “There’s still something I want to achieve this week”.

And at the end of the day, he says that when you sign off on a file for a national park that has finally been consolidated,

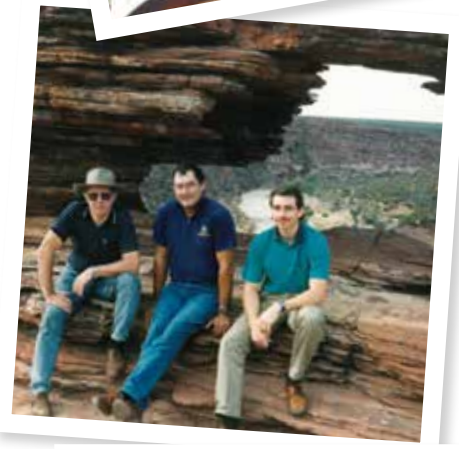
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Above left Alex and Roger Underwood (a former Director of CALM) working among the Bungle Bungle Range in Purnululu National Park.

Above CALM Corporate Executive in 1988 (left to right) Barry Wilson, Don Keene, Jim Edwards, Alex Errington, Syd Shea, Dexter Johnson, Chris Haynes, Jim Armstrong, Ron Kawalilak, Frank McKinnell.

Inset top Alex in his role as WA’s Deputy Ombudsman.
Photo – The West Australian

Inset centre Alex and Roger Underwood with then regional manager Andrew Hill at Nature’s Window in Kalbarri National Park.

Inset right Alex with former Premier of WA, the late Sir Charles Court.





you can say: "I had a hand in that – I played a role in the protection of that land in perpetuity".

LEAVING A LEGACY

In the last 12 years, Alex has also been responsible for negotiating land purchases where environmental offsets were required as a condition of land clearing, under either the *Federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* or the *State's Environmental Protection Act 1986*. This is where Alex's enormous knowledge of the environment and wildlife of WA has come to the fore and enabled highly suitable habitat, particularly for the endangered Carnaby's cockatoo, to be purchased and secured into the conservation estate.

Alex's land acquisition work for the State has been a complex task. Conflicting interests can make land acquisition a demanding role and the WA community has been extremely fortunate to have a man of Alex's calibre and experience working on their behalf.

He is regarded by all his past and present colleagues as a man with a vast number of admirable qualities – a tremendous work ethic, a friendly and

helpful demeanour, a huge knowledge of WA's environment and wildlife, and a down-to-earth and practical way of approaching his work. He is a joy to work with and it is not possible to spend time in his presence without picking up on his commitment and quiet enthusiasm for his work.

Alex also has a passion for travel and when he is not working, he is usually on a cruise with his wife Faye to another exotic and unusual destination. There are not many parts of the world that the two of them have not travelled to.

In the 2015 Australia Day Honours List, Alex was awarded the Public Service Medal in recognition of his outstanding public service to land conservation and environmental preservation in WA through policy development and senior management roles.

The Public Service Medal recognises outstanding service by employees of the Australian Government and state, territory and local government employees. Alex exemplifies the best of the public service ethos. He has worked tirelessly, and with great passion and integrity, to acquire lands throughout WA for addition to the State's terrestrial conservation system.

Top left Alex's 1958 letter of appointment.

Far left Alex holding a certificate of title of a recent purchase.

Photo – Tracy Shea/DBCA

Above Being awarded the Public Service Medal from Her Excellency, Kerry Sanderson AC the Governor of Western Australia.

Inset above Alex and Faye Errington with Lieutenant General John Sanderson AC, former Governor of Western Australia.

Tracy Shea was the Parks and Wildlife Service assistant director policy and planning. *'Touched by nature' is a feature that tells the stories of people who have used their experiences in nature to enrich the lives of others.*