

Community

RIVER CARE

For the past 20 years, the award-winning Swan Alcoa Landcare Program (SALP) has been supporting the community to improve local environments along Perth's river system with fantastic results.

by Mark Thornley and Sophie Henderson





It's almost impossible to walk past a local lake, riverbank or bushland site without seeing first-hand the hard work and resulting benefits achieved by volunteers under the Swan Alcoa Landcare Program (SALP).

Since 1998, the program has provided more than \$67 million in funding for more than 1,300 projects enabling volunteers to undertake a wide range of works in their local areas, from invasive weed control, feral bee removal and dieback management, to improving water quality in waterways and rehabilitating areas of natural bushland.

A joint initiative of Alcoa of Australia, the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA), and Perth NRM, the program is regarded as one of Australia's most successful community landcare initiatives.

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

SALP aims to protect and manage natural assets by funding the community to restore waterways and bushland, critical habitat and ecological linkages along the Swan Canning catchment.

Since the program began, more than 1,900 hectares of land has been revegetated through the planting of about 2.5 million seedlings by volunteers, who have contributed nearly 182,000 hours – an amazing effort.

The program assists DBCA to deliver water quality initiatives under the *Swan Canning River Protection Strategy*, an important management tool in planning

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Left SALP volunteers have planted more than 2.4 million plants and controlled weeds on 4,762 hectares of land.

Inset above left Dick Stone monitors plantings at one of the Canning River Regional Park SALP sites.

Photos – Mark Thornley/DBCA

Inset above SALP projects create invaluable native animal habitat and food sources.

Photo – Kate Bushby/DBCA

and delivering environmental and recreational outcomes.

The SALP projects help improve the quality of ground and surface water in Perth's rivers and wetlands by reducing the flow of nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen and other contaminants into the Swan and Canning rivers – reducing the risk of harmful algal blooms and fish kills. They also aim to prevent erosion, reduce the spread of invasive species and create crucial native animal food source and habitats.

Indeed, many people do not realise how far-reaching the program is and the huge environmental contribution involved, with up to 40 community groups making a difference each year across the Swan Canning catchment.

VOLUNTEERS

It is these volunteers that are the backbone of the program's success, the people who directly deliver environmental benefits on the ground. Close encounters with snakes and venomous spiders, sinking waist-deep into mud, discovering rare plant species and witnessing the return of native animals to project sites are all in a day's work for SALP volunteers.

Not only does the program give volunteers the opportunity to take on environmental stewardship over their favourite local patch, it provides community groups with the continuity to be able to plan long-term or linked projects spanning multiple years.

It brings together community members who are passionate about making a difference to their local area, while maximising resource-sharing between Perth's landcare groups. In fact, key group representatives can contribute to assessing, prioritising and awarding each year's grant applications.

Richard Janes from the North Swan Land Conservation District Committee finds visiting past project sites to see the transformation of the area extremely satisfying. Some of the revegetation sites that he's been involved with are now home to fully mature trees and shrubs, as well as white-cheeked honeyeaters and firetail finches.



Above Osprey at Mount Henry Peninsula.
Photo – Matt Kleczkowski



Right Baigup wetlands.
Photo – Marie Lochman

At Canning River Regional Park, where Jo Stone has been a volunteer for a remarkable 25 years, SALP volunteers have transformed degraded drain sites into living streams and converted old rubbish tips into thriving wetlands while creating new recreational spaces for residents and their children to reconnect with nature.

Another volunteer is Penny Lee from the Baigup Wetlands community group, which has been wrestling blackberry vines and typha while saving melaleuca trees for many years. As a great grandmother, Penny says she wants to leave the environment in the best possible condition for future generations.

ENTICING FUTURE STEWARDSHIP

Encouraging younger generations to connect with nature is a major challenge facing community groups, with most having an ageing volunteer population. Most SALP volunteers are between 50 and 90 years old.

It can be difficult to attract younger volunteers to community groups and therefore succession planning is underway to guarantee the future of these projects.

Ben Turnbull-Goggins is one of several Aquinas College students caretaking the Mount Henry Peninsula bushland site overlooking the Canning River. The student caretakers look forward to working on the site and spending time outside.

They enjoy getting out of the classroom and switching off from technology and social media while caring for the environment. The lucky student volunteers have even spotted a pair of ospreys that nest at the bushland site and are frequently seen fishing and feeding their chicks.

Other young volunteers like Adrian Botha from Ellen Brockman Integrated Catchment Group are excited about SALP's future and the possibilities that lie ahead. Adrian says he enjoys working with passionate, like-minded people and has been learning new skills every day.

ACCESSING FUNDING

SALP is an excellent example of community collaboration. Total funding for the program including leveraged funds and the value of volunteer hours is nearly \$18.3 million over the past two decades. During 2018 the SALP grants round offered \$330,000 to 25 community groups to deliver 53 projects.

This funding is critical in supporting the current work already being undertaken and is a great example of a long-term commitment to grass roots landcare providing groups with continuity of delivery across hundreds of priority sites.

It provides community catchment groups with a user-friendly way to apply for environmental grants of up to \$20,000 for each project to help look after their own patches.

The application process is designed to be simple and cost efficient for groups while offering expert advice on landcare techniques and approvals through SALP's key project partners.

Long-time SALP champion and former manager of corporate relations at Alcoa, Brian Doy, sums the program up best when he says the most impressive thing about the program is the people.

"You always see passionate, committed people doing what they can with the resources they have for the environment they live in," he said.

"There are people out there working on their project, their wetland and their patch of bushland that need to know they're supported, that there are people out there with the same ideals, that are like minded and in many ways SALP is the glue that binds them all together."

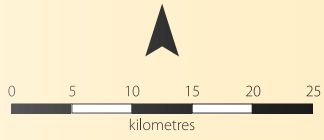
Opposite page

Inset top SALP volunteers carrying out winter planting.

Inset centre Young volunteers carry out water planting of sedges at the Southern Wood drain site in Armadale.

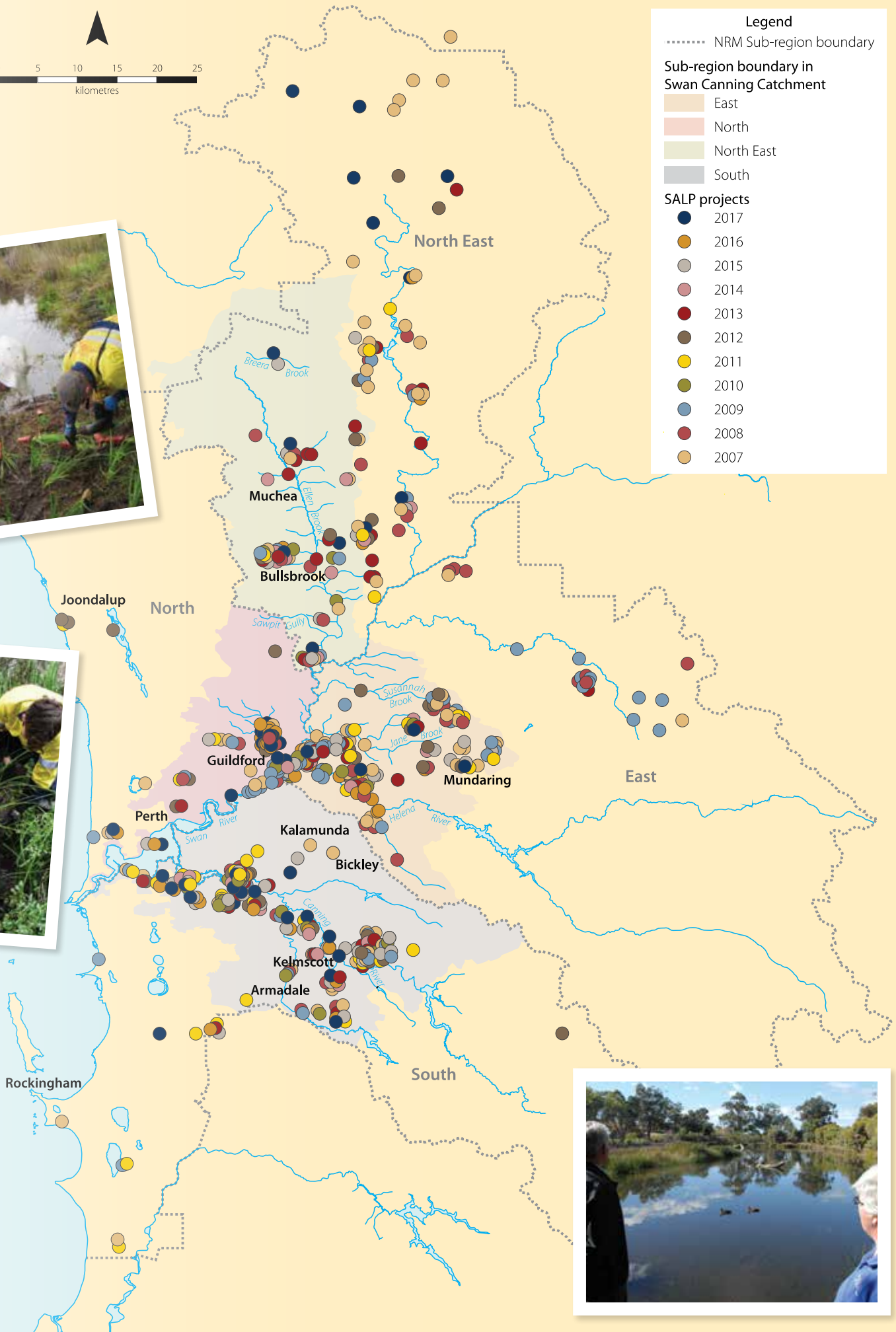
Inset right Brian Doy and Julie Roberts inspecting the Bannister Creek wetland.

Photos – Mark Thornley/DBCA



Legend

- NRM Sub-region boundary
- Sub-region boundary in Swan Canning Catchment**
 - East
 - North
 - North East
 - South
- SALP projects**
 - 2017
 - 2016
 - 2015
 - 2014
 - 2013
 - 2012
 - 2011
 - 2010
 - 2009
 - 2008
 - 2007





Bennett Brook Reserve

Bennett Brook Reserve is a 140-hectare 'Bush Forever' site, a conservation category wetland and an ecological corridor connecting Whiteman Park to the Swan River.

It is also the beneficiary of 18 SALP grants from 1999–2016 worth \$682,246. These grants have revitalised the reserve with strategic revegetation continuing and expanding to 33 sites in 2017 totalling 30 hectares.

This success can be attributed to a small core group of volunteers that form the Friends of Bennett Brook (FoBB), which have performed an enormous amount of site work. However, the project outcomes could not have been achieved without the involvement from a wide variety of organisations and the community.

Between 2002 and 2016, 10,395 volunteer hours have been contributed, valued at more than \$300,000.

SALP volunteers have assisted in planting more than 245,000 plants into the reserve as well as removing priority weeds. The grants have enhanced the group's ability to secure commitment from land managers and other stakeholders, as well as leverage additional funds allowing continuous revegetation of the area and significant environmental, social and community outcomes to be achieved.

The FoBB received its first SALP grant in 1999 to revegetate four sites within the brook totalling 1.2 hectares. The reserve provides vital habitat for a variety of birds and for significant fauna including freshwater mussels and the endangered southern brown bandicoot.

The floodplain area of the brook (0.76 hectares) was completely covered with blackberry and was first cleared in 2002. Over the following 10 years 14,764 native plants were installed and have established extremely well. From 2012 on, the site has been managed for weeds with more than eight hectares of blackberry removed with only a few small stands remaining today.

Some of the dryland areas adjacent to Bennett Brook were completely degraded by veldt grass with only a few shrubs remaining. In 2002 weed control was started and about 9,500 plants were installed between 2004 and 2007. More than 15 hectares of veldt grass is controlled annually in the dryland areas of the reserve.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

SALP fosters a spirit of collaboration and enables DBCA to harness valuable local environmental knowledge and engage communities to help address the key environmental issues for priority landcare areas.

The program is full of colourful characters and is a great outlet for people of all ages to socialise with an extended family of nature lovers.

Bush poet Bronwyn Edney is one of the custodians of the Bennett Brook site and believes being outdoors and active is one of the reasons so many of the volunteers are so healthy.

"It's great exercise and just good for the soul," she said.

"I've met some wonderful people and I love the camaraderie we all have – we all look after each other and love nature and being in the outdoors."

One of the best outcomes Bronwyn has seen on the Bennett Brook site is the regrowth of underground plants that have encouraged the return of bandicoots to the area.

EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY

SALP empowers the local community and triggers numerous projects that would not be considered under other conventional environmental grant streams.

It facilitates the employment of local weeding, spraying, fencing and earthmoving contractors and in some cases, provides career pathways for families involved with managing and administering community groups throughout the Swan Canning catchment.

The program also provides a great practical training ground for young people looking for environmental apprenticeships or management experience prior to entering other management roles in environmental industries or throughout the public sector.

Jake Pickersgill started volunteering with the Bannister Creek Catchment Group (BCCG) when he was seven years old and has since forged a successful career in the environment industry.

His father became an environmental manager and his mother served as secretary for BCCG. Jake attributes

many of his skills to his time with BCCG and feels that it set him on the path to his current career.

For more information or to apply for SALP funding, please visit www.perthnrm.com.

Above left Bennett Brook was originally covered with blackberry vines.

Photo – Mark Thornley/DBCA

Inset Melinda McAndrew at Bennett Brook.

Photo – Stuart McAndrew

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