

Lighting the spark

20 YEARS

of Bush Rangers WA

Twenty years ago *Bush Rangers WA* was launched to give high school students the opportunity to spend time outside while learning about conservation and land management through practical and hands-on activities. Since then, more than 19,000 students have been involved in the program and have volunteered 2.2 million hours, delivering a range of benefits to the community, the natural environment and the cadets themselves.

by Karla Graham





It's 6am and already the camp is buzzing with activity; a group of 60 teenagers are out of bed and preparing for another day outdoors in one of Western Australia's most remote and special places. They've woken up to the sun throwing morning light on the rich-orange cliffs of Cape Range National Park, while the pristine turquoise waters of the Indian Ocean stretch as far as the eye can see to the west. The chorus of bird calls intensifies with each passing minute as, like the *Bush Rangers* cadets, the birds ready themselves for a busy day.

The cadets, aged between 12 and 17 years, spent the previous day building fences around the national park. Today's highlight will be the chance to swim with whale sharks in the clear waters of the Ningaloo Coast World Heritage Area. But first, they are due at the ranger's station by 8am to help Parks and Wildlife Service staff check traps for threatened wildlife as part of a monitoring program.

For many of these cadets, this camp is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But this camp is just one of the many opportunities that are offered to Western Australia's young people through *Bush Rangers WA* – a community development and environmental education program that recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.

GROWING STRONG

Established in 1998 by the then Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and Office of Youth Affairs, *Bush Rangers WA* joined the ranks of Army Cadets, Emergency Services Cadets and Police Rangers as part of the wider Cadets WA program, which today is coordinated by the Department of Communities. The program set out with a simple aim: to empower young people to play an active role in conservation through practical and hands-on experiences in the environment. Students meet regularly at their schools and also have the opportunity to attend camps, where they complete tasks such as planting, fencing and weeding. But it's not all hard work; cadets have the chance to take part in a range of adventurous





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Bush Rangers WA



Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.

activities including abseiling, swimming with whale sharks and rock climbing.

The first school to officially join the program was John Septimus Roe Anglican Community School in Mirrabooka. Set up by the ever-passionate Carleen Edwards, the unit fast became popular with students. Carleen has continued to lead the unit and was also a pioneer for the *River Rangers* and Emergency Services cadets programs at the school (see also 'Bush telegraph' on page 6–7). Later that year, Mount Lawley Senior High School's chaplain Andrew Paul set up a unit that has become one of the biggest *Bush Rangers* units in the State, with 175 students enrolled, and a waiting list for others to join.

The program expanded quickly to other schools and gained support from school and community groups, local councils and department offices throughout the State. In fact, in the 20 years following the program's inception, more than 19,000 people have taken part, together contributing over

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Bush Rangers cadets have the opportunity to take part in a range of activities.
Photos – DBCA

Above left Cadet units are located throughout the State and visit some of WA's most spectacular areas.
Photo – Mount Lawley Senior High School

Above Cadets learn about WA's plants and animals through hands-on experiences.
Photo – DBCA

2.2 million volunteer hours to conservation and community projects. And today, a staggering 3273 secondary school students, from 67 units spanning from Kununurra to Esperance, are taking part in and benefiting from the program.

WINNING BACK WILDLIFE

A key focus for the program has been to build young peoples' appreciation of, and love for, WA's natural environment. The *Bush Rangers* program has been developed in conjunction with *Western Shield*, the department's wildlife recovery program, to expose students to real-world conservation projects and to help combat the threat of introduced predators on native animals.

Last year, 15 *Bush Rangers* cadets played a crucial role in reintroducing black-flanked rock wallabies to Kalbarri National



Park. Kalbarri District High School *Bush Rangers* cadets helped carry the rock wallabies down into the park's rocky gorges in their backpacks and helped Parks and Wildlife Service staff radio-track them over the following weeks. Black-flanked rock wallabies were believed to be locally extinct until one was spotted in the park in 2015, so animals were translocated from Wheatbelt reserves to bolster the tiny local population.

These kinds of up-close interactions with WA's most threatened animals give meaning to the concepts of conservation that young people learn about in classrooms. For 14-year-old Brearley, carrying the wallabies safely into the gorges in a simulated pouch was an "inspirational experience".

Kalbarri National Park senior ranger Mike Paxman, who has worked with the local cadet unit since he moved to Kalbarri in 1999, said the benefits of the *Bush Rangers* program were multi-dimensional.

"On the one hand, experiences like these help the students understand the importance of fauna monitoring and habitat protection, and they see first-hand the impact of introduced species," he said.

"But the activities also light a spark in the cadets where they develop a genuine affinity for their local natural environment

and a passion for conservation that will hopefully stay with them forever."

CARING FOR COUNTRY

One of the program's greatest strengths has been its expansion into remote and regional areas. This has provided opportunities for Aboriginal students to gain practical nature conservation skills, which they are able to combine with their traditional knowledge to care for Country. In fact, 28 per cent of cadets are Aboriginal and *Bush Rangers WA* has the highest participation rate for Aboriginal students of any of the Cadets WA programs.

According to Wiluna Remote Community School's former cadet unit leader Debbie Kiwi, when it comes to working on Martu Country, the students become the teachers.

"They just blossom; because they are hosting. They're proud of their Country. They're proud to teach us everything. They giggle and laugh at us because we don't know a lot of stuff ... but it's a pleasure to them to actually teach us."

For some *Bush Rangers* cadets, the program becomes the foundation for careers in conservation and land management, and a number of cadets have gone on to work for government departments and other organisations dedicated to caring for WA's environment.

Top left *Bush Rangers* was a finalist in the 2008 Premier's Awards. Then coordinator Alison Hansen (left) and Strategic Development and Corporate Affairs Director and program pioneer Ron Kawalilak received a certificate from then Environment Minister Donna Faragher.

Top centre Senior ranger Mike Paxman with Kalbarri District High School cadets, preparing to translocate rock wallabies into Four Ways Gorge in Kalbarri National Park.

Above left Students from John Septimus Roe Anglican Community School at the launch of the program in 1998.

Above More than 19,000 students have taken part in the program since its inception.
Photos - DBCA

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Last year, Kalumburu Remote Community School celebrated its first graduate who went on to secure a trainee ranger position with the Wunambal Gaambera Rangers in the far north Kimberley.

Parks and Wildlife Service operations manager Chris Stewart's interest in the natural environment was nurtured during his time as a cadet at Rossmoyne Senior High School. Chris now works to ensure operational work is delivered across the 800 reserves in the Wheatbelt and assists with burning, landscape conservation and recreation projects. Chris said the

★ **Bush Rangers cadet units**

"What I love most about the *Bush Rangers* program is the outdoor component; getting out on Country, especially living in the Kimberley we get to experience things that you'd never get to do in the city ... I couldn't think of a better place to do it ... That freedom to go out and care for something that you don't get in a normal school program."
Grant Capes, unit leader, Fitzroy Valley District High School

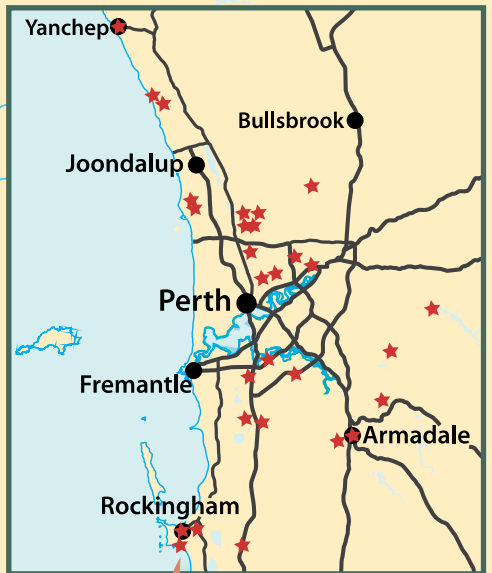
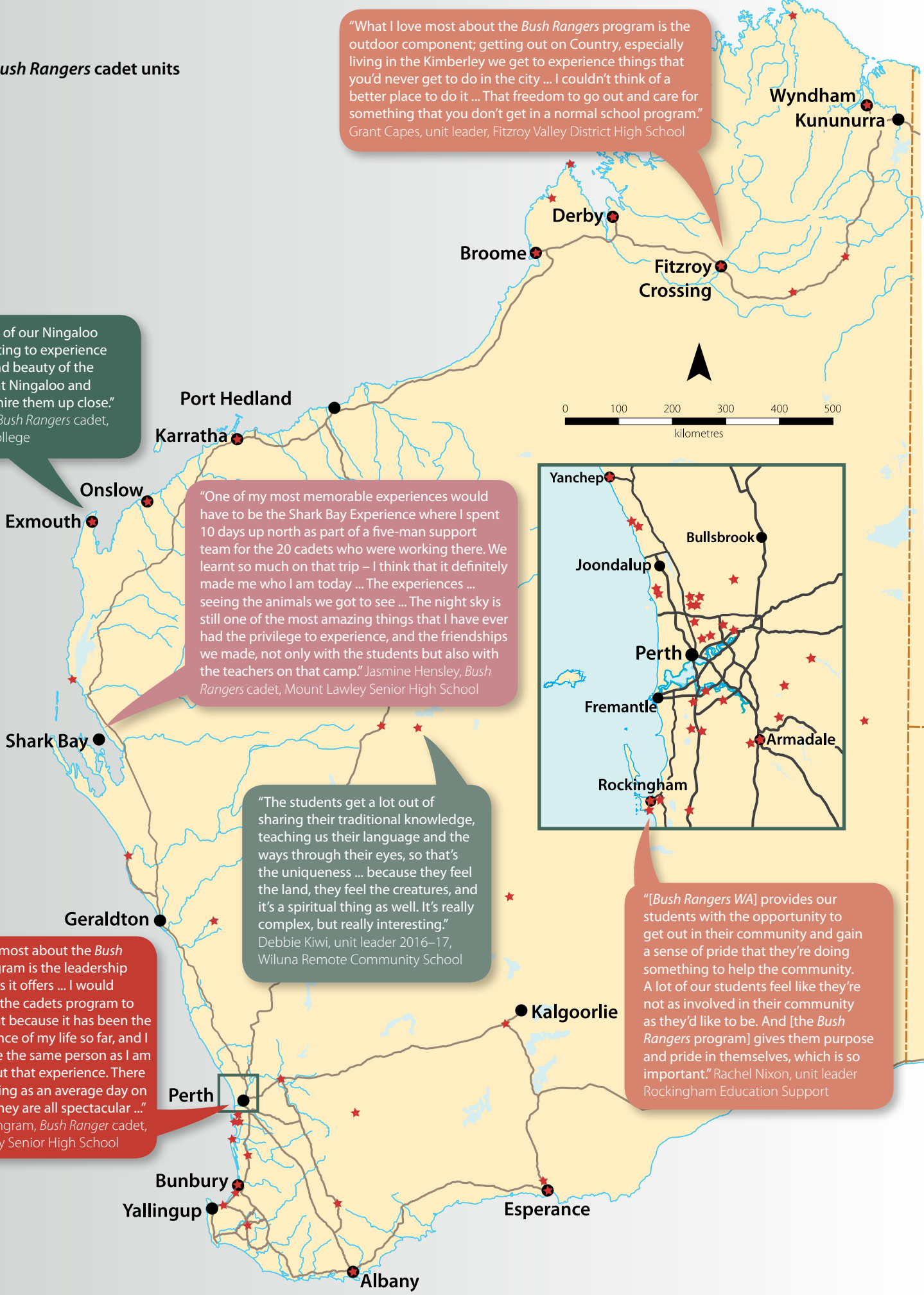
"The highlight of our Ningaloo camp was getting to experience the wonder and beauty of the whale sharks at Ningaloo and getting to admire them up close."
Abigail Smith, *Bush Rangers* cadet, John Tonkin College

"One of my most memorable experiences would have to be the Shark Bay Experience where I spent 10 days up north as part of a five-man support team for the 20 cadets who were working there. We learnt so much on that trip – I think that it definitely made me who I am today ... The experiences ... seeing the animals we got to see ... The night sky is still one of the most amazing things that I have ever had the privilege to experience, and the friendships we made, not only with the students but also with the teachers on that camp."
Jasmine Hensley, *Bush Rangers* cadet, Mount Lawley Senior High School

"The students get a lot out of sharing their traditional knowledge, teaching us their language and the ways through their eyes, so that's the uniqueness ... because they feel the land, they feel the creatures, and it's a spiritual thing as well. It's really complex, but really interesting."
Debbie Kiwi, unit leader 2016–17, Wiluna Remote Community School

"What I love most about the *Bush Rangers* program is the leadership opportunities it offers ... I would recommend the cadets program to every student because it has been the best experience of my life so far, and I would not be the same person as I am today without that experience. There is no such thing as an average day on our camps; they are all spectacular ..."
Ethan Betts-Ingram, *Bush Ranger* cadet, Mount Lawley Senior High School

"[*Bush Rangers* WA] provides our students with the opportunity to get out in their community and gain a sense of pride that they're doing something to help the community. A lot of our students feel like they're not as involved in their community as they'd like to be. And [the *Bush Rangers* program] gives them purpose and pride in themselves, which is so important."
Rachel Nixon, unit leader, Rockingham Education Support





opportunities he had through the *Bush Rangers* program helped him understand the department's role and gave him the opportunity to visit regional areas and meet department staff.

For Tina Bowers, her hands-on connection to the *Bush Rangers* program didn't end when she left school. Tina attended John Septimus Roe Anglican Community School and returned as a unit instructor after she finished school. Tina went on to complete a Bachelor of Science in Biological Sciences from Edith Cowan University before joining the former Swan River Trust as a graduate Indigenous officer under the Riverbank program. Tina is now a DBCA project officer and works on the department's *Reconciliation Action Plan*. Tina says she draws on the leadership skills and confidence that she gained through the program in her work.

ACCESS FOR ALL

Another key strength of the program is the way it provides for the 28 per cent of cadets who have a disability. The *Bush Rangers* program offers tailored experiences for students with a range of abilities to give them, and their carers, the opportunity to visit natural areas, take part in hands-on nature-based activities throughout the State and learn new skills.

For the 60 students who make up the Rockingham Education Support School *Bush Rangers* unit and have varying disabilities, the program gives them the chance to spend time outside, get involved in their local community and learn about the environment.

Unit leader Rachel Nixon said for some students, taking part in activities represented an enormous milestone.

"We had one student who had an intense fear of water, but managed to walk over a boardwalk at Lake Clifton to view ancient stromatolites, while another student saw a cuttlefish on a beach for the first time and learnt what it was. By the end of the year, this student was able to explain the difference between microplastics and large plastics, and the often-fatal impact of microplastics being ingested by marine creatures," she said.

An overnight bush camp near Nannup was monumental for one student who, while looking at the moon through a telescope for the first time, spoke her first-ever words outside her home. These case studies epitomise the *Bush Rangers* program's aim of how the simple act of spending time in nature and exploring its wonder can have lasting effects on people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

The program's emphasis on volunteering and community involvement is at the heart of its success and it simply could not operate without the dedication of the teachers who run it. In 2017, 350 school teachers who led the 67 cadet units gave more than 52,000 hours of time to the program, most of it voluntary and in addition to their normal teaching or assisting duties at school.

Meanwhile, the 3273 cadets together contributed 320,000 hours, of which 43,000 was spent on community service projects that ranged from revegetation to rubbish collection. Many of these projects deliver tangible benefits to the community. However, the benefits of the program extend well beyond what

Above left The *Bush Rangers* program offers a range of opportunities to students of all ages and abilities.

Above Unit leaders exploring Rio Tinto Naturescape Kings Park during their annual conference.

Photos – DBCA

you can measure. The opportunities that the cadets are given will, in many cases, stay with them for their lifetime. Some cadets will go on to pursue a career in conservation and work to protect the natural environment, while others will simply have a greater appreciation for our plants and animals. Meanwhile, some cadets will acquire practical skills that may assist with their employment opportunities, while others may just get a sense of satisfaction from pushing themselves outside of their comfort zone, thereby improving self-confidence. The benefits of the program are undeniable, and the future of WA's natural environment is sure to be brighter because of it.

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