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ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION

2009

Year in review




 Department of Environment and Conservation
 Our environment, our future 

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JANUARY

The year began on a positive note with the State Government announcing its support for World Heritage nomination and National Heritage listing for the Ningaloo Reef and Cape Range National Park.

The Esperance lead issue was back in the headlines after DEC placed strict new licence conditions on the Esperance Port Authority.

The unlawful taking of black cockatoos from the wild continued to be of concern for the department. An orchardist was fined \$3,000 for shooting eight Baudin's black cockatoos.

As usual, it was another busy month for DEC's fire teams as the extremely dry summer conditions prevailed. A fire that began on 15 January in Bridgetown burned 5,877 hectares and resulted in the loss of seven houses and nine sheds, along with 1,600 hectares of mostly privately owned pine and blue

gum plantations. The fire suppression effort involved 411 DEC staff. At the same time a large fire that started near Two Rocks rapidly spread through the northern section of Yanchep National Park and forced the park to close temporarily. The fire burnt a total of 10,270 hectares.

FEBRUARY

As the hot dry summer in WA continued, it was the devastating fires in Victoria which required the attention of DEC fire crews. More than 30 DEC personnel from the south-west forest regions travelled to Victoria to assist with a range of fire suppression activities over a two-week period.

February proved to be a rewarding month for scientists, with an abundance of rare native flora and fauna discovered at several wetlands in the south-west during a mapping and monitoring program. These included uncommon species of acacia, the rare western mud minnow and burrowing freshwater crayfish.

From rare species to invasive ones – on 27 February, the cane toad frontline officially crossed the WA-NT border. The first cane toad was detected by quarantine officials at a checkpoint about 40 kilometres east of Kununurra. The news made headlines around the country.

DEC industry regulation officers were also kept occupied with the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council's Canning Vale waste composting facility, which continued to be the subject of odour complaints from the community. As a result DEC issued the Council with an Environmental Protection Notice.

In the State's north-west, severe weather in the central Pilbara, which had the potential to cause flash flooding and landslides, led to the closure of all gorges in Karijini National Park and Millstream-Chichester National Park.

Also this month, the Environment Minister launched the Environmental Community Grants program, leading to nearly 300 applications.



DEC Senior Planning Officer Roger Armstrong and Michael Jose from FESA with the WA contingent that travelled to Victoria to assist with the devastating bushfires of February 2009.

MARCH

This proved a challenging month for animal rescues. More than 60 DEC staff and hundreds of volunteers threw their hearts and hands into helping with a mass stranding of long-finned pilot whales and dolphins, which were stranded over six kilometres of beach at Hamelin Bay. Although most of the 92 marine mammals had already died by the time they were discovered, a mammoth rescue effort ensued for the surviving whales.

Also this month, assessments began at Albany Port to ensure environmental health standards were being met.

DEC also hosted a forum for university students to discuss their current research and projects in relation to Ningaloo Marine Park and surrounding areas.

APRIL

April was a winner for conservationists. For the first time in almost 20 years, a rare carnivorous marsupial, the chuditch, was spotted and filmed in the Perth metropolitan area.

Also in the Swan Region, Pollution Response Unit officers removed five illegally dumped drums filled with toxic material near one of WA's main drinking water catchments. The drums were found just 50 metres from Pickering Brook and only two kilometres from Lake CY O'Connor which leads to Mundaring Weir.

The Easter long weekend kept DEC staff across the State very busy. In the Exmouth District, a four-metre saltwater crocodile was found off Point Maud in Coral Bay. The crocodile was put down to remove a clear and present danger to the public.

That same weekend, an awareness campaign and blitz on unlicensed off-road vehicle use at Wedge and Grey, north of Lancelin, was hailed a success with 25 Caution Notices issued to drivers with unlicensed motorbikes.

In late April an illegal consignment of 34 reptiles was intercepted by wildlife officers at Perth Airport, estimated to be worth up to \$40,000 on the black market. The illegal haul of reptiles was stopped en-route to New South Wales.

MAY

A southern right whale carcass washed up at Wedge, about 160 kilometres north of Perth, and caused the beach to be closed.

Goldfields and Esperance businesses were under the microscope for correct environmental registration. At the same time they were also being warned to be aware of bogus controlled waste carriers following a spate of illegal waste disposals in the area.

May was also a time for awareness-building, with the Minister for Environment encouraging students to take part in conservation programs as part of National Volunteer Week. The annual International Day for Biological Diversity also highlighted the destruction caused by invasive alien species.

At the month's end, about 160 birds including ibis, silver gulls, ravens, pacific black ducks and a pelican were found dead around the Henderson landfill site. Tests revealed there were high levels of the pesticide Fenthion present in the dead birds' stomach contents, causing their deaths.

JUNE

This features as a prominent month on the environmental calendar with World Environment Day on 5 June. This proved to be very timely in 2009 with the discovery of a threatened shield-backed trapdoor spider (*Idosoma nigrum*) in bushland on Mount Matilda Nature Reserve at Wongan Hills, and the State's largest release

of threatened forest red-tailed black cockatoos into the wild.

The Auditor General also released his report on threatened species, highlighting the significant challenge WA faces in conserving the State's rich biodiversity.

The State Government announced funding of \$600,000 to create a 400-hectare predator-free enclosure for the woylie in the south-west and for urgent conservation actions at Perth Zoo, to ensure the survival of the critically endangered species.

The spotlight stayed on woylies when DEC operations made world headlines, after a woylie fitted with a tracking device was found inside a python that had been stolen from DEC premises.

Nature Protection officers successfully prosecuted a New South Wales man for

attempting to smuggle 12 pythons out of WA, while at the same time preparing for a busier than usual annual migration of whales from Antarctica to warmer waters off WA's coast.

This month also saw the graduation of 15 people from DEC's Graduate Development Program, while Kimberley Fitzroy Crossing ranger Anthony Aitken was named the department's Aboriginal Trainee of the Year.

Ongoing clean-up plans for the former Bellevue Waste Control site were presented to the community and action was taken against three industrial businesses that allegedly discharged oil into Bickley Brook in Maddington.

Other highlights this month included the release of the State Environmental (Ambient Air) Policy and the



Pictured at DEC's Graduation and Award Ceremony were (left to right) Karim Khan, Shannon Dixon, Colin Narrier, Louise Grubb, Tim Moore, Keiran McNamara, Lynnda Church, Criag Hart, Ryan Belotti, Jess Mann, Jarrah Phillips, Anthony Aitken, Anthea Depster-East, Clinton Hull, Richard Wilkes, Environment Minister Donna Faragher, Luke Puertollano, Lawrence Harris, Richard McAlinden.



announcement of \$3.6 million in grants to address the impacts from WA's former mining and industrial practices.

A series of open forums and community workshops were also held to help shape the State Government's Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy.

JULY

The south-west notched up a couple of milestones in July with the Tree Top Walk near Walpole registering its 2.5 millionth visitor and the Minister announcing WA's first marine park on the south coast, the Walpole and Nornalup Inlets Marine Park.

On the operational front, DEC's marine wildlife protection efforts were boosted with the delivery of three new boats: a 5.8-metre rigid inflatable Naiad and two 9.3-metre catamarans.

Although things were quiet on the whale front during July, Nature Protection Branch completed a successful dolphin rescue at Golden Bay.

In Perth, the Pollution Response Unit responded to a mass dumping of 44-gallon drums near the Swan River and in Gidgegannup, while Keep Australia Beautiful (KAB) reminded Perth Fashion Festival goers that 'Green is the new pink' and to keep the city streets as clean as the catwalks.

KAB's 2009 Sustainable Cities Award went to Brunswick River Restoration Action Group.

In cyberspace DEC's NatureMap picked up the environment and sustainability category prize in the 2009 WA Spatial Excellence Awards, which recognise projects showing exceptional innovation, community or environmental benefits and raise the public profile of information databases.

The department's leading newsletter, *Environment and Conservation News*, made the leap from hard copy to e-copy

and is published online every fortnight.

Technology was the feature once again when new air monitoring equipment, a \$170,000 Fourier Transform Infrared Red spectrometer, was unveiled in Kwinana, to assist with industry regulation activities.

There was a variety of activity in the Kimberley during the month. The Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy forums and workshops got under way, while the early dry season prescribed burning program was completed with burns totalling 725,000 hectares, and \$945,000 was allocated for Kimberley visitor facilities.

Endangered species across the State benefited from various funding allocations during the month with \$360,000 going to a joint DEC-Department of Planning Carnaby's black cockatoo project, and the community group Project Numbat handing over \$5,500 for radio tracking of the nimble marsupial. NRM funding went to the western swamp tortoise (\$250,000), and to both the western ground parrot and Gilbert's potoroo (\$60,000).

The release of the Middle Report, a review of native vegetation clearing in WA, provided several key recommendations for improving the regulatory framework controlling clearing of native vegetation in the State including the development of a shared database on native vegetation.

In Geraldton, a local man was fined \$1,000 for illegally removing 600 kilograms of sandalwood, valued at \$3,800, from Kalbarri National Park in January.

AUGUST

This was a big month for environmental approvals with the Environment Minister giving the go-ahead to the proposed Gorgon gas development on Barrow Island, and for Magellan Metals to export containerised lead through Fremantle.



Wayne Moroney (DEC), Anna-Lena Janzen (Ocean Park), Duncan Thomson (Ocean Park), Ed Fenny (Ocean Park), Dave Holley (DEC) and Ross Mack (DEC) with an 80-year-old green turtle that was nursed back to health after it was stranded in Shark Bay.

It was also a successful month for clamping down on snake smuggling. Two boa constrictors were seized in Perth and two corn snakes in Cairns as part of a major inter-agency wildlife trafficking investigation. The interest generated by this case prompted one snake-lover to hand over two pythons he was keeping illegally.

There was good news for the endangered western swamp tortoise as 30 captive-bred tortoises were released in Moore River Nature Reserve. And in Shark Bay a rehabilitated one-metre-long female green turtle, estimated to be 80 years old, was successfully released by DEC officers and Ocean Park ecotourism centre staff.

There was also good news for the Midwest Region with the allocation of \$1.4 million for visitor facilities in national parks and other conservation areas.

In the south-west, the completion of

the Munda Biddi Trail was put on track by an allocation of \$3 million in Royalties for Regions funding for the scenic 1,000-kilometre mountain bike trail that will run from Kalamunda to Albany.

WA broke new ground in August when six forest fire experts, five from DEC and one from the Forest Products Commission, were sent to Canada for the first time to help fight a series of wildfires that had stretched British Columbia's resources to the limit. The WA team was part of a 30-strong Australia-New Zealand contingent that spent five weeks assisting the Canadians.

WA had little to be proud of when the Keep Australia Beautiful 2009 National Litter Index was released and Western Australians were shown to be among the worst litterbugs in the country. Efforts to promote the litter-free message were boosted by West Coast Eagles Brent Staker

and Quinten Lynch who launched KAB Week by taking part in a clean-up at North Balga Primary School.

A \$4,500 fine given to a Morawa man for the unlawful possession of three Carnaby's black cockatoo chicks and 11 red-tailed black cockatoo (*samueli* subspecies) chicks and adults helped send the message that the department will investigate and prosecute those who illegally catch and keep wildlife.

SEPTEMBER

WA islands featured in the news this month with the announcement of \$890,000 from the Federal Government for the eradication of rodents on six islands along the Pilbara and Kimberley coasts. The Kimberley islands biological survey resulted in the discovery of 48 new snail species.

On the mainland, the Pilbara region completed its 2009 prescribed burning program which involved 15 aircraft burns, 110 kilometres of edging and one hand burn, resulting in a total of 102,800 hectares burnt.

Community conservation efforts around WA were assisted by the State Government's allocation of \$1.5 million in community environmental grants.

Recycling efforts also made progress during September with the Environment Minister announcing a new battery recycling initiative to help Perth residents recycle batteries used at home, and the State's first mattress recycling program.

OCTOBER

October marked the start of the coronial inquest into the 2007 Boorabbin National Park fire that resulted in the tragic loss of three lives. The State Coroner presided over the inquest for three weeks in what was a challenging time for all DEC staff involved.

Western Australia's biggest penalty

for pollution was handed down to the Esperance Port in October, with the Magistrates Court fining the Port \$525,000 plus costs, after convicting it on five charges relating to lead contamination in Esperance and one charge of emitting a nickel odour. WA's previous highest fine for pollution was \$60,000 handed down in 2004.

The final *Cane Toad Strategy for Western Australia 2009-19* was released by the Environment Minister, focusing on minimising the impacts of the invasive species and implementing long-term management solutions over the next decade.

The discovery of two new species of acacia in the Wheatbelt and 100 new plant species in the Kimberley was welcomed by the scientific community, while the Environment Minister announced plans to create a new national park at Dirk Hartog Island in the Shark Bay World Heritage Area and a new marine park in humpback whale calving waters at Camden Sound off the Kimberley coast.

NOVEMBER

This was the month for community recognition with both the Tidy Towns and Environment Awards winners announced. The Pilbara town of Hedland claimed the State title in the 2009 Tidy Towns – Sustainable Communities awards, while the Kalgoorlie Boulder Urban Landcare Group received the Overall 2009 Environment Award.

This year's Environment Awards were a great success with more than 104 entries received from organisations throughout the State, and from as far north as Kununurra to Esperance on the south coast.

November was a challenging month for the department, particularly for staff involved in the Boorabbin Coronial Inquest, with the Coroner releasing his findings and

recommendations late in the month.

Nature protection staff were again on the go with an eight-metre humpback whale carcass lodged offshore at Burns Beach and a six-metre humpback whale carcass washed up on a beach near Denmark.

Top honours were given to DEC's principal research scientist Dr Lachie McCaw, who was awarded the top prize at the inaugural Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre Awards for Excellence.

The protection of threatened plant species was given yet another boost with the announcement of a major funding injection of \$2.9 million, part of which will be used to eradicate a dieback outbreak in Fitzgerald River National Park.

DECEMBER

Perth was shrouded in a thick smoke haze for three consecutive days due to fires near Harvey and Walpole, which burnt an

estimated 20,000 hectares.

Meanwhile, 10 black swan cygnets were rescued from drying Forrestdale Lake, saving them from an almost certain death from predation by foxes and starvation. About 35 volunteers from bird handling organisations and DEC staff mustered the cygnets and relocated them to safer habitat in Yanchep National Park.

As the Kimberley region prepared for its first wet season since cane toads crossed the WA-NT border in February, the Environment Minister allocated \$340,500 to the Kimberley Toad Busters to support the fight against cane toads. The funding was part of a \$1.2 million election promise.

The year ended with a celebration following the births of two baby dolphins at Monkey Mia. Samu and Khamun were born to separate mothers two weeks apart.

Many DEC staff also took a well deserved break over Christmas to recharge their batteries in preparation for the year ahead.



DEC Senior Research Scientist Anne Cochrane celebrated her involvement in the international Millennium Seed Bank (MSB) partnership, which involved DEC and the Kings Park and Botanic Gardens, and has seen 10 per cent of the world's wild plants collected and conserved by banking 24,200 species.

