



EcoEducation celebrates 250,000 learners

DEC's EcoEducation program celebrated its 250,000th learner recently.

The occasion was marked with an event at the Perth Hills National Parks Centre where the achievements of the program were honoured and a certificate was presented to Eastern Hills Senior High School.

Strategic Development and Corporate Affairs Director

Ron Kawalilak has nurtured the program since its inception and said the program had expanded significantly.

"EcoEducation started in 1993 and has grown to offer 25 different programs on a range of topics such as threatened species, biodiversity and Aboriginal culture," he said.

"These programs provide many opportunities for students of all ages to take part in nature-based, experiential learning opportunities which are curriculum-linked.

"EcoEducation has also forged many

successful partnerships with organisations including the Science Teachers' Association of WA, the Curriculum Council of WA, Kings Park and Botanic Gardens Authority and the Department of Education."

Ron said the 250,000th learner milestone highlighted the popularity of the program which was now regarded as one of the country's most comprehensive, continuous and reliable environmental and science education programs.

"The success of the program is a credit to the staff who run the programs, led by Senior Project Officer – EcoEducation Elaine Horne and, before her, Liz Moore," he said.

Elaine said EcoEducation offered exciting opportunities for students and teachers which helped them appreciate the natural environment and learn practical ways to protect and

conserve it.

"The students who take part in the programs are not visitors or listeners or people playing with exhibits, but participants in learning courses in the environment," she said.

"EcoEducation started in 1993 and has grown to offer 25 different programs on a range of topics such as threatened species, biodiversity and Aboriginal culture"



(From left) DEC EcoEducation Officer Trevor Walley; Minister for Planning, Culture and the Arts John Day; Strategic Development and Corporate Affairs Director Ron Kawalilak; and Senior Project Officer EcoEducation Elaine Horne.



WA dolphins to be bolstered by report recommendations

DEC and the Swan River Trust will implement recommendations contained in Chief Scientist Lyn Beazley's report into the deaths of six dolphins in the Swan Canning Riverpark in 2009.

The recommendations relate to research, community awareness, protocols and the establishment of a working group to investigate the ongoing health of the Swan River dolphins and are the first steps to ensuring the well-being of the dolphins, as well as contributing to the health of the rivers.

In her report, Professor Beazley said three dolphins (including a dolphin that died in 2007) were believed to have died from ulcerative skin lesions, caused by a virus commonly referred to as Tattoo Skin Disease.

A fourth dolphin died from a fungal infection of the brain and a fifth dolphin suffered from bronchopneumonia, although this dolphin also had severe fishing line entanglement.

Two dolphins were too decomposed to determine the cause of death.

Professor Beazley said the dolphins appeared to have died after an inflow of fresh water associated with rainfall events in winter and spring.

"The reduced salinity may have caused cellular damage to the epidermis (outer layer of the skin), leading to increased susceptibility to viral attack," she said.

Professor Beazley said exposure to fresh water inflows also appeared to have contributed to the recent death of two dolphins in the Port River in Adelaide.

She said it was not possible to determine if other factors – including exposure to contaminants and stress induced by human activities – had predisposed the dolphins to disease.

Environment Minister Donna Faragher said the report highlighted the need for ongoing research and a coordinated approach

to the protection of dolphins in the Swan River Riverpark. The implementation of the recommendations would supplement the extensive work being undertaken by the Government to protect and preserve the Swan Canning river system.

"We have secured an additional \$250,000 in the 2010–11 State Budget to help us begin to implement the recommendations, which will also be co-funded through existing programs," she said

Some of the new initiatives will include:

- an immediate assessment of the dolphin community frequenting the rivers to provide an accurate estimate of the number and population structure
- establishment of a photographic record of the dolphin community and to determine the incidence of Tattoo Skin Disease in the population

- creation of 'report cards' to monitor estuarine health, in conjunction with the departments of Water and Fisheries
- \$60,000 for emergency collection and post-mortem examinations in the unfortunate event of other dolphin deaths, to understand factors contributing to disease and mortality
- promotion of river-friendly fishing practices, including biodegradable bait bags, and to support the recovery of tangled or broken fishing lines

- \$50,000 to expand the *Dolphin Watch* program, where volunteers are trained to identify individual dolphins and report their behavior

- establishment of a working group to investigate the ongoing health of the dolphins in the Swan Canning Riverpark. The group will include representatives of science institutions, government agencies and the community and will report to the Environment Minister by the end of the year.

The report is available at www.swanrivertrust.wa.gov.au and www.dec.wa.gov.au



(From left) Dale Harvey, Alena Kessel, Melinda Cartner, Michael Higgins, Chris Nutt, Barb Green, Professor Lyn Beazley, Ewan Buckley, Liesl Ludgerus and John Lloyd.

Chief Scientist visits DEC

DEC's Marine Policy and Planning Branch welcomed Western Australia's Chief Scientist Professor Lyn Beazley to their Fremantle base last month.

Professor Beazley arranged to visit the branch to seek further information on dolphin research being undertaken in the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park.

Senior Marine Conservation Officer Barb Green said that Professor Beazley had a strong interest in dolphin research in Perth and the community-based Dolphin Watch Program being facilitated by the Swan River Trust which aims to improve understanding of bottlenose dolphins in the Swan River.

"It was great to be able to provide Professor Beazley with an overview of my research efforts to date which includes identification photographs of bottlenose dolphins found in the marine park, some of which had sustained injury through what appeared to be boat strike.

"Research in the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park is being undertaken over a two-year period and will result in a catalogue of identification photos of dolphins. It will also result in DEC and Murdoch University having access to a spatial database of how the dolphins use the marine park."

Information collected through Barb's research will complement the Dolphin Watch Program and previous studies of dolphins in Cockburn Sound and may lead to a greater understanding of how bottlenose dolphins use the river and the south metropolitan coastal waters.

Professor Beazley congratulated Marine Policy and Planning Branch staff on their enthusiasm for the work they undertake to establish marine parks and reserves in Western Australia and was keen to be kept informed of the branch's progress over time, and the outcomes of dolphin research in the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park.



Wildlife experts gear up for a whale of a season

DEC's Wildlife Officers are preparing for another busy whale season as the annual migration of whales from Antarctica to warmer waters off Western Australia's northern coast gets under way.

DEC whale expert Doug Coughran said humpback whales made the 13,000-kilometre round-trip in small groups and humpback whales and southern right whales would become a regular sight off the WA coast until the end of the year.

"The west coast humpback population has been estimated at more than 22,000 and as their numbers continue to rise, nature will take its course and the weaker ones are likely to become casualties in order to maintain a healthy population," he said.

"As a result we are anticipating yet another busy whale season with more sick whales coming ashore."

Wildlife officers have also reported an earlier than usual start to the 2010 whale season with the carcasses of two young severely malnourished humpback whales found washed up on the south coast last month.

Last year, DEC dealt with 47 humpback whale beaching incidents in which 13 whales died during palliative care and four were euthanased to end their suffering.

"Live whale beaching incidents are assessed on a case-by-case basis and due to their massive size and weight our main priority is to ensure the safety of staff and volunteers. Consequently it's not always possible for wildlife officers to safely access and deal with the animal," Doug said.

"Humpback whales will usually only come to shore if they're sick, so we always carry out a clinical assessment before deciding what the best course of action is without prolonging the animal's suffering."

Doug recently returned from an International Whaling Commission technical workshop in America where experts discussed disentanglements of large whales and euthanasia techniques. Whale experts from nine countries attended.

The hunting of humpbacks in Western Australian waters ceased in 1963 when the population was depleted to less than 500 individuals.

"To go from having less than 500 humpbacks on the west coast, to having more than 22,000 today is extremely encouraging and is a spectacular wildlife recovery story," Doug said.

Anyone who sees an injured, entangled or sick whale should keep a safe distance from the animal, refrain from pushing it out to sea and contact DEC's Wildcare Helpline immediately on 9474 9055.

Published by the Department of Environment and Conservation's Strategic Development and Corporate Affairs Division, Cygnet Hall, (cnr) Mounts Bay Road and Hackett Drive, CRAWLEY, Western Australia, 6009

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(From left) Yanchep volunteers Andrew Greaves and Thelma Weyer with Yanchep National Park Manager Alison Pritchard, Environment Minister Donna Faragher and Volunteer Coordinator Julia Coggins.

Volunteers celebrated at Yanchep

Environment Minister Donna Faragher joined DEC staff and volunteers at Yanchep National Park last week to celebrate youth and the environment during National Volunteer Week.

The Minister started her visit at the historical Yanchep Inn where she was welcomed by Park and Visitor Services Division Director Peter Sharp who opened proceedings.

A Welcome to Country was conducted by Nyoongar Elder May McGuire before the Minister addressed those in attendance.

Mrs Faragher made her way around the recreation area of the park to view volunteers, school groups and Bush Ranger cadets engaged in activities conducted throughout the year such as weeding, water monitoring, wildflower garden maintenance, planting, rubbish pick up and assisting with koala care and maintenance.

Yanchep National Park Volunteer Coordinator Julia Coggins said the Minister's attendance reflected the high regard in which volunteers are held within Yanchep National Park and the wider community.

"It is such an honour to have the Minister visit Yanchep and acknowledge all the hard work done by our wonderful team of volunteers," Julia said.

Yanchep's wildflower garden is enjoyed by many of the 240,000 people who visit the park each year and is solely maintained by volunteers. Volunteer Thelma Weyer leads a team of volunteers each week who ensure the garden is always at its best.

While in the park, the Minister met with various groups of volunteers who work on areas including helping the ranger maintain a koala colony and providing guided walks.



New visitor facilities at Lesmurdie Falls

VISITORS to Lesmurdie Falls will be able to enjoy spectacular views across the Swan Coastal Plain from improved vantage points with the opening of new facilities at the popular recreation site.

The \$850,000 upgrade has involved partially demolishing the former bridge over Lesmurdie Brook and converting it to a viewing platform. A second cantilevered viewing platform further down slope has been installed to provide panoramic views of the coastal plain, city and falls.

The works also include a major upgrade of the car park; improved pedestrian access; picnic and toilet facilities, including wheelchair access; and a new interpretation shelter to help orientate visitors on the numerous park walks.

Regional Parks Branch Project Manager Jayson Puls said Lesmurdie Falls was one of the few readily accessible waterfalls in the outer metropolitan area.

"The site attracts about 54,000 visitors each year and

is particularly popular during winter and spring when the falls are at their best and the wildflowers are in full bloom," Jayson said.

"Lesmurdie Falls is a significant site for local residents and visitors, and these improvements will certainly be appreciated.

"The upgraded facilities and new interpretation shelter will enhance people's visits and provide an even greater opportunity to view the amazing scenery this area offers.

"The site was particularly challenging for the contractors who completed the works, with access a major constraint. All construction materials had to be carried in by hand, including steel support beams that weighed 450 kilograms each."

An opening for the new facilities was held in April, attended by Environment Minister Donna Faragher. Community volunteer groups will join DEC this winter to undertake extensive planting of local native species to rehabilitate areas around the falls.



Environment Minister Donna Faragher and Project Manager Jayson Puls at the opening of the new facilities.



Kate Brown with management notes for haas grass on FloraBase and a specimen of the invasive grass species.

Weed information on FloraBase

DEC's FloraBase website now features information on more than 200 environmental weeds, helping better manage invasive species.

Management notes for a selection of the most problematic environmental grass weeds in bushland on WA's Swan Coastal Plain and in the jarrah forest region have been added to the online database. *FloraBase* is the State's premier online flora database that references more than 13,000 WA plant species.

The information has been prepared by DEC Project Manager Kate Brown and DEC Project Officer Karen Bettink.

Karen said many of the estimated 1,350 species of environmental weeds in WA posed a serious threat to biodiversity, particularly remnant bushland and wetlands in the south-west and on the south coast.

"For this reason, it is important to provide accessible, current biological and best practice management information to enable us to understand and control some of our most problematic species," Karen said.

"More than 70 serious grass weed profiles have recently been completed and are now available online, providing current information on the biology, ecology,

impacts and methods to control these weeds.

"These invasive grasses, many of which originate from similar environments in South Africa, can form dense monocultures, produce prolific seed that can readily be dispersed, are able to survive fire, displace native plants and animals, and suppress growth or regeneration of other plants."

The species added to *FloraBase* include the invasive haas grass, which has been the subject of an eradication program in Perth but has recently been discovered near Mt Barker, and tambookie or coolatai grass, a common sight on roadsides around the south-west, but also a serious weed that is rapidly spreading into bushland in the region.

Each year thousands of hectares of conservation lands are treated for weed control or eradication by DEC, with a focus on the State's highest priority invasive species.

In addition to the grasses, information on some 130 species of geophytes and woody weeds is available. The final group of environmental weeds to be added will be the annual and perennial herbs, which will take the total number of species in the database to more than 300.

For more information visit <http://florabase.dec.wa.gov.au>.

