

Qualified divers can help to protect Australia's reefs

# Lending a hand

Volunteering is a great way to make a real difference to threatened ecosystems in the Antipodes, as **Philippa Jacks** discovers...

**Y**ou can't visit Australia and New Zealand without falling in love with its wildlife. With some of the world's strangest species of plants and animals, and with 18 UNESCO World Heritage natural sites between them, the two countries are a nature-lover's paradise.

But like everywhere in the world, ecosystems in the Antipodes are threatened by issues ranging from climate change and deforestation to overfishing and disease. Australian Wildlife Conservancy, which buys up sanctuaries to protect threatened ecosystems, says that Australia has the worst history of mammal extinction in the world. A shocking 27 mammals have become extinct in the last 200 years, and the government recognises 1,500 mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and plants as being under threat.

The statistics make for depressing reading, but there are a growing number of volunteering opportunities where visitors and locals alike can lend a hand.

Conservation Volunteers is an excellent place to start. This organisation coordinates more than 2,000 practical conservation projects across the two countries

## Joining a 'voluntourism' project is a great way to meet like-minded people

each year. As well as 13,000 local volunteers, the organisation also had 2,500 international volunteers last year, including more than 300 from the UK. You can either pick a specific project a few months ahead, or sign up further in advance for a 'Conservation Experience', beginning from your choice of 27 offices and lasting the number of weeks you choose. In these, meals and accommodation are included.

As well as seeing parts of Australia and New Zealand that you might not otherwise see, joining a 'voluntourism' project is also a great way to meet like-minded people – and it goes a little way towards making up for that longhaul flight!

### SAVE THE TASSIE DEVIL

Say 'Tasmanian Devil' and many people think instinctively of the Looney Tunes cartoon character. But the real-life Tasmanian Devil is facing a very serious crisis.

A contagious, lethal form of cancer, known as Devil Facial Tumour Disease, is spreading fast. Populations have declined by as much as 60 per cent in the last 10 years, and there's a real risk the animal will become extinct if scientists can't find a cure.

At Bonorong Wildlife Centre, near Hobart, founder Greg Irons and his team are trying to bolster numbers by taking in healthy, orphaned Tassie Devils and nursing them until they're ready to be released into the wild. The Centre cares for other orphaned and injured



animals such as pademelons, bandicoots and sugar gliders. Volunteers at Bonorong can work hands-on with the animals, feeding and caring for them, as well as helping build enclosures and educating visitors to the Centre. "It's great for anyone considering a career in animal care," says Greg.

Volunteers do not pay to be involved, but are asked to work a minimum of seven days. The centre can help volunteers to find affordable lodging nearby.

The state government has also teamed up with Tasmania University to set up a Save the Tasmanian Devil Program. Volunteers can join a survey team on a field monitoring trips lasting around 12 days, helping to trap and release Tasmanian Devils.

**Clockwise from top** Marine turtles in Australia have become the victim of non-native predators; Andrew Fenton volunteered in New Zealand's South Island; Turtles need to be measured and tagged; The Tasmanian Devil is facing a serious crisis; Tiny baby turtles need your help; Turtle nesting behaviour also needs to be monitored



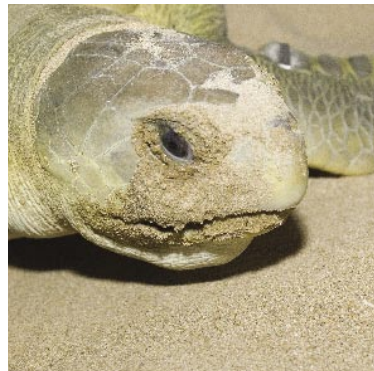


## Planting trees for the future

**Andrew Fenton spent five months volunteering for Conservation Volunteers New Zealand (CVNZ) after finishing school. Andrew says:**

"A placement with CVNZ was a great way for me to spend a year out because I did not feel quite ready for university. I had never been away from home for more than a week so a five-month placement was a large undertaking for me.

"I was glad to have my accommodation and food organised for me. I think that my favourite project was in the South Island in Craigieburn because of its location, with amazing mountain scenery. We stayed in a beautiful lodge in a manuka forest and the facilities were top class. I found the tree-planting enjoyable because I felt like I was making a real difference. When you get 1,500 trees planted in one and a half days, the feeling of accomplishment is amazing."



Elsewhere in Australia, volunteers can help save marine turtles. Six of the world's seven species of marine turtle are found in Australian waters, and most of them are listed as endangered.

Debris in the ocean and being caught as by-catch by fishermen are key threats. Turtle nesting grounds are threatened by habitat loss, and by species of predator that are not native to Australia.

## MONITOR TURTLE POPULATIONS

Biosphere Expeditions, an award-winning volunteer organisation, has just set up its first Antipodean project, working with flatback turtles in Western Australia.

"We don't really know how big the threat to flatbacks is, because very little is known about them," explains managing director Matthias Hammer.

"They are the only turtle species with IUCN [International Union for Conservation of Nature] status of 'indeterminate', so the expedition is to find out more about them so that informed management and protection decisions can be taken."

Volunteers will assist scientists in measuring and tagging turtles and recording their nesting behaviour. The expedition lasts one week, and volunteers will stay at Eco Beach Resort in Broome in the Kimberley. It's expected that the project will run every November for the next five years and costs £980, excluding flights.

Queensland is another turtle hotspot. Cape York Turtle Rescue In Tropical North Queensland works with the local Aboriginal community of Mapoon to measure and tag both flatback and olive ridley turtles, and help stop feral pigs from eating turtle eggs by fitting special protection. Camps last either three >>





## Preserving New Zealand's national parks

**Jimmy Johnson became hut warden coordinator in New Zealand's Department of Conservation (DOC) after volunteering himself. He says:**

"I came to New Zealand from Norwich in 1990 to watch the Commonwealth Games, but I fell in love with the country's natural beauty, the friendly people and their laid back approach to life, so my six-week stay lasted 11 months. Once back in the UK I applied for residency. My background is in retail and sales management so it's a far cry from conservation volunteering.

"I first got involved because I hiked the Tongariro Northern Circuit and got talking to a volunteer at one of the mountain huts. She told me that the DOC is always looking for volunteers. As a hut warden I get to go out and enjoy the World Heritage area as well as look after the mountain hut and the many visitors who stay the night.

"In 1995, I became the hut warden coordinator within the Department of Conservation, organising the programme. I've had 300 volunteer hut wardens through since then, including 44 from the UK."

or five nights, take place between July and October and cost from £708. Volunteers stay in comfortable tents at Camp Chivaree on the banks of Janie Creek.

For a more ad-hoc volunteering opportunity, consider Mackay and District Turtle Watch, further down the coast. Local volunteers spend their evenings monitoring nests and counting the number of successfully hatched flatback eggs on over 30 beaches in the Mackay district. They also help educate local people on how they can help: for example, reducing light pollution so it does not disorientate turtles.

## CLEANING UP THE COASTLINE

Much of the marine debris from the South East Asian region lands up on the shores of the Australia's Northern Territory. Discarded fishing nets, plastic bags

## Volunteers work with the local Yolngu Aboriginal community to record and remove rubbish

and bottles and other rubbish trap and drown marine wildlife, or if ingested can cause a slow, painful death.

On World Expedition's seven-day Arnhem Land Marine Rescue Project, volunteers spend time working with the local Yolngu Aboriginal community to record and remove the rubbish, and possibly help release any wildlife found caught in the debris.

Four days are spent volunteering; the other three are spent exploring the beautiful coastline and learning from the Yolgnu people. Men might try hunting and



fishing while women can get involved in bush food and medicine. The trip departs in September and costs £1,320, with volunteers staying in tents.

### BUSHFIRE RECOVERY

In February 2009, an area near Melbourne, Victoria, was hit by catastrophic bushfires destroying thousands of houses and, tragically, claiming more than 170 lives. A massive 400,000 hectares of land were also affected, with much of its flora and fauna decimated.

Fire is a common, natural event in this part of Australia, and many native plants and animals are adapted to recover after fire. However, this natural recovery is threatened by non-native species interfering in the process.

A project has been set up in the town of Marysville on which volunteers spend five days planting native trees, shrubs and grasses, and reinstating fences to keep grazing animals away from vegetation as it tries to regrow. There is also general clean-up work, and wildlife surveying, to be done. Conservation Volunteers can provide more information about this.

### BE A HUT WARDEN

New Zealand boasts no fewer than 14 national parks, ranging from the Westland/Tai Poutini National Park, which has 60 glaciers and 3,000-metre high peaks, to the beaches and bays of Abel Tasman National Park.

Hut wardens play a vital role in ensuring that visitors can enjoy the parks safely and responsibly, by giving out information, making sure that tracks, trails and walkers' accommodation is well-maintained, and monitoring wildlife in the parks.

The New Zealand Department of Conservation (DOC) has a well-established volunteer hut warden



### Protecting Australia's reefs

**Guy Shepherd moved to Australia from the UK around 12 years ago, and has been volunteering for Reef Check Australia for two years. He says:**

"I found out about Reef Check by a chance meeting on a dive boat with Jos Hill, who set it up. I've always been interested in nature and conservation issues, but had no previous conservation experience.

"The training for Reef Check is relaxed but thorough. If you're only on holiday it might be worth doing your first aid and oxygen provider course before you arrive, and you need to be a PADI Rescue Diver as a minimum.

"We need to identify substrates, invertebrates, reef impacts and fish with a high level of accuracy for the results to be meaningful.

"Reef Check has been a great way to combine my enjoyment of diving with increasing my knowledge of the reef and its inhabitants, meeting like-minded people, and gaining better protection for the marine environment."

program, which allows members of the public to act as hut wardens in remote parts of its national parks. Volunteers need a good level of fitness and need to commit to a five or seven day shift, but they can often sleep in the hut for free.

The DOC website offers warden opportunities at six locations, including Whirinaki Forest Park in the Bay of Plenty; Whanganui National Park; Egmont National Park; and Welcome Flat Hut in South Westland, where hut wardens can bathe in the nearby hot springs.

### CORAL REEF RESEARCH

The Great Barrier Reef is one of Australia's most famous icons, stretching 2,300 kilometres along the Queensland coastline.

It's home to a staggering 1,500 species of fish; 175 bird species; 30 mammal species; and countless corals, sponges, worms and crustaceans. Much of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is now a protected area, which means fishing, tourism, and other potentially damaging activities are carefully controlled.

However, the reef still faces some massive threats. Pesticides and sediment from the land flow into the >>

**Clockwise from top left**  
Conservation volunteers in Australia help to rebuild footpaths and assist with tree-planting and re-vegetation projects; Volunteers are needed to help preserve the shores of the Northern Territory; Diving for Reef Check; Jimmy Johnson (third from left) loves meeting people as part of his work as a hut warden for New Zealand's Department of Conservation



image top: Guy Shepherd Other images: Reef Check Australia

**Clockwise from top left** The fascinating marine life on the reefs needs protecting; Reef Check volunteers need to accurately record what they see; Getting up close to fascinating marine life is a perk of the job; Volunteering offers a great way to meet some like-minded people

ocean, killing the tiny organisms that create the corals of the reef. The rising temperature of the ocean, caused by global warming, and the ‘souring’ of the oceans, caused by acidification, is killing the sensitive organisms that create coral at an alarming rate.

OUCH (The Order of Coral Heroes) is just one organisation that looks to volunteers to help protect the reef. Based in Airlie Beach in the Whitsundays, OUCH sends volunteers out to install marker buoys on the reef where the reef is particularly ‘sensitive’, so that boats do not drop their anchors nearby. Volunteers do scuba surveys to monitor and record the general health

of the coral reef, and there’s also a mangrove project which collects data on the little-researched mangrove habitats, home to threatened dugongs and turtles.

“There aren’t many opportunities in the UK for mixing dugong and dolphins with a desk job!”

Further up the coast, Reef Check Australia began collecting data on the Great Barrier Reef in Townsville, Queensland in 2001. More than 150 divers have since qualified as volunteer survey divers, and there are also six-month-long ‘project officer’ placements, where volunteers help to organise the monitoring efforts.

“These placements are generally filled by people in their mid-20s from overseas, with lots from the UK,” says Gemma Routledge, who became a full-time volunteer for Reef Check Australia after quitting her high-flying marketing job in London.

“While it’s pretty tough financially, I don’t regret the move. There aren’t many opportunities in the UK for mixing dugong and dolphins with a desk job!” 🇦🇺

## Choosing the right project

\* The number of companies selling conservation holidays and projects has rocketed in the last few years. There are many excellent companies which operate as non-profit-making entities. However, there are also plenty of unscrupulous operators which are more interested in making money than saving the planet. Volunteering on a project where you do not have to pay is a pretty safe bet.

\* If you do decide to book a trip with an operator, ask to speak to previous volunteers to get their feedback and find out exactly how your money is being used. The Ethical Volunteering website has some useful questions you should ask if you're considering getting involved.  
[www.ethicalvolunteering.org](http://www.ethicalvolunteering.org)

\* WWF Australia has an excellent 'volunteer' section on its website with opportunities like radio-tracking microbats in the Hunter Valley near Sydney; helping on a wallaby breeding programme in Marlborough, Queensland; and the Harbour Keepers project in Sydney Harbour. WWF New Zealand's site also has useful links to volunteering organisations.  
[www.wwf.org.au/act/volunteer](http://www.wwf.org.au/act/volunteer)  
[www.wwf.org.nz](http://www.wwf.org.nz)

\* If you don't have time to volunteer, you can still do your bit for wildlife by submitting your holiday photos of whale sharks on Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia to Ecocean's 'Join The Dots' campaign. Ecocean is building up a library of images to analyse their populations. WWF New Zealand is asking the public to do the same with Maui's dolphin sightings. There are just over 100 of these critically-endangered dolphins left.  
[www.whaleshark.org](http://www.whaleshark.org)

## Useful sites:

- \* [www.australianwildlife.org](http://www.australianwildlife.org)
- \* [www.bonorong.com.au](http://www.bonorong.com.au)
- \* [www.australianwildlife.org](http://www.australianwildlife.org)
- \* [www.CapeYorkTurtleRescue.com](http://www.CapeYorkTurtleRescue.com)
- \* [www.reefcheckaustralia.org](http://www.reefcheckaustralia.org)
- \* [www.tassiedevil.com.au/help.html](http://www.tassiedevil.com.au/help.html)
- \* [www.mackayturtles.org.au](http://www.mackayturtles.org.au)
- \* [www.conservationvolunteers.com.au](http://www.conservationvolunteers.com.au)
- \* [www.conservationvolunteers.co.nz](http://www.conservationvolunteers.co.nz)
- \* [www.biosphere-expeditions.org](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org)
- \* [www.doc.govt.nz/getting-involved/in-your-community](http://www.doc.govt.nz/getting-involved/in-your-community)

