

Sustaining life

A love for Australia's wildlife lies at the core of our nation's identity. It sustains our wellbeing. That is something that Dr **Leonie Valentine** can personally attest to as her passion for wildlife has helped her through good times and bad. Here she explains how.

I've wanted to be a zoologist since I was 4. It began with a field trip in the rainforests of Queensland's Wet Tropics, an expedition led by the renowned zoologist George Heinsohn. The story goes (for truth be said I can't remember much of this, it's a story my father recounts) that I followed George around, watching him capture and identify all sorts of animals. I informed my parents that this is what I wanted to do when I grew up.

Many of my younger years were spent traipsing after Dad, an ex-farmer turned uni lecturer with a passion for butterflies. He took us to many remote places as he hunted for obscure food plants and described various butterfly life cycles. My parents were very active in encouraging and fostering a love of nature and wild things; and I started bird watching at a young age. Although never a brilliant naturalist, I loved knowing what animals were what, and why they lived where they did.

My education and training only deepened that passion, and cemented what will probably be a life-long passion for reptiles. I earned a Bachelor of Science and PhD at James Cook University, where the numerous field trips in deserts, forests and shorelines exposed me to more amazing wildlife.

I did a lot of fieldwork on cattle grazing stations in tropical savannas for my PhD. Here, I met a diverse range of land managers and began to really appreciate that you don't have to be a 'conservationist' to have a strong conservation ethic.



TSR Hub Researcher Profile

After this, I worked in government agencies in Queensland and Western Australia, where I focussed on a range of land management issues. The time I spent in government was valuable for showing me how the outputs of research can be adopted by land management policies; and some of the challenges facing management practitioners.

I returned to academia as a post-doc, first at Murdoch, then at the University of Western Australia. At UWA I joined Richard Hobbs' Ecosystem Restoration lab, where I now work on aspects of restoration ecology. My passion for conservation and asking questions is driven by a belief that we have an ethical responsibility to do what we can to reduce our impact on the environment.

My current research with the TSR Hub investigates how fauna can drive landscape restoration. Working in collaboration with managers and researchers from environment agencies, we are examining the role of digging mammals as ecosystem engineers.

Leonie with a quenda (also known as a southern brown bandicoot). Once common throughout many parts of coastal Australia, the quenda now only persists in isolated pockets in some urban and peri-urban reserves, where Leonie's research is investigating their role in ecosystem restoration. These prodigious diggers are believed to play an important ecosystems engineering role by cycling nutrients and distributing seed and fungus.

Recently, I had a career break due to treatment for aggressive breast cancer. Like many people who have had brushes with death, it is easy to question one's life purpose during such times. When I was at a very dark time, my love of wildlife kept me strong. I would find joy in watching the honeyeaters in the garden and dreaming of wild places yet to be visited. This appreciation for the environment helped me find my purpose again.

I have since returned to conservation science at UWA. I have less energy than I once had, but with a greater conviction that conservation research is worthwhile and valuable. I hope my enthusiasm for wildlife and understanding the complex interplay of life is contagious and encourages more people to value our unique and precious natural heritage.

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COVER IMAGE: TSR HUB PHD STUDENT MELISSA HOUGHTON IS MONITORING INVERTEBRATES ON MAQUARIE ISLAND TO TRACK ITS RECOVERY AFTER RABBITS, RATS AND MICE WERE REMOVED IN 2013. (SEE PAGE 4 FOR THE FULL STORY). IMAGE: BY BEN HORNE

Science for saving species

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