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Ancient waterhole brought to life

They're as ancient as the land itself, and for many thousands of years were life-giving sources of food and water for Australia's southwest Aborigines.

Gnammas (a Nyungar Aboriginal word) are nature's water tanks: deep holes carved in granite outcrops by millions of years of geology – often with the help of Aborigines – that collect rainwater.

Dotted around what is now WA's parched Wheatbelt, these rock formations not only provided vital water for the Aborigines, they attracted animals and birds that were hunted. As Southwest tribes followed the seasonal wetlands and lakes over the dry summer months, gnammas were often the only water source.

Large gnammas were rare and highly valued by the Aborigines. Many are sacred sites that were maintained and guarded until European settlement brought farming, wells and bores (though many early farmers also relied on Aboriginal gnammas for water).

One such watering hole is the large gnamma at Derdibin, near the Wheatbelt town of Wyalkatchem, about 200km east of Perth. The 4m x 3m granite hole is on a small reserve and one of the most important sites in the region, according to local Nyungar elder Kevan Davis.

With many Aborigines having lost their connection to land over the years, most ancient watering holes have been left to stagnate – silting up from wind-blown topsoil and fertilizers, and turning putrid from thirsty animals falling in and drowning.

The Derdibin gnamma was in just such a state when Mr Davis oversaw its restoration recently. It was the first of a series of planned gnamma clean-ups as part of a Caring For Our Country initiative backed by local farmers, the Shire of Wyalkatchem, Wheatbelt Natural Resource Management Inc and conservation group WWF-Australia.

Also helping with the Derdibin restoration were four young Conservation and Land Management students from Northam TAFE – Alisha Ashworth, 16, and local Nyungars Kiel Atwell, 24, and his sisters, Shantelle Bennell, 23, and Margaret Bennell, 17.

"This place would have been guarded in the old days, as water was very scarce," Mr Davis explained during the clean-up. "This is one of the three biggest gnammas in the region, so it was a very important source of water. It's also a sacred site, because it gives life. It's what kept our ancestors alive out here."

During a blistering day under the Wheatbelt sun, the gnamma was first drained of its slime-green sludge before the volunteers jumped into waist-deep mud to shovel out possibly 100 years worth of silt, fencing posts, animal bones and other assorted refuse. Although it was hard yakka, Mr Atwell said he was happy to reconnect with the land.

"The indigenous aspect of looking after the land is taught at TAFE, so I wanted the experience to help with my course," Mr Atwell said. "But I also wanted to do this because not every young Nyungar is. We have to start looking after the land – not just to save the environment but because it's part of our culture."

After the messy clean-up, a beaming Mr Davis was more than happy with the results.

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"That water will come alive again," he said, nodding towards the 2.5m deep hole, ready to fill with fresh winter rain. "This is a big project for me. It's pretty hard nowadays to get our young (Aboriginal) people doing this stuff, but it's great to see these youngsters helping out and reconnecting with the land.

"It's a matter of pride for them – they're very enthusiastic. It's also a chance to experience how their ancestors would have lived."

Based on their experience at Derdibin gnamma, Mr Davis and WWF envisage a gnamma maintenance protocol being developed to restore and preserve these ancient watering holes throughout the Wheatbelt region.

Many of the areas – including Derdibin – fall under WWF's Zones for Conservation Action, which have been identified by world-leading experts using state-of-the-art systematic conservation planning tools, which flag the most important biodiversity "hotspots" within the Southwest Australia Ecoregion.

WWF Healthy Bushlands Project Officer Phil Lewis said he hoped it was the start of more cooperation between groups to restore WA's ancient landscapes, both for cultural connection and biodiversity conservation.

"This was an amazing event to be part of right from the word go," Mr Lewis said. "Everyone on the day did what they could to help. The TAFE students certainly weren't scared of getting dirty in the gnamma or on the bucket line, and everyone else took turns at wheelbarrowing away the sludge or piling up the sticks and rocks.

"It's great to think that the protocols for cleaning Derdibin might set a standard for the rest of the region and that we can all help to clean up others across the Wheatbelt and the remainder of the Southwest Australia Ecoregion."

Mr Lewis said many Wheatbelt gnammas were on private land, and so a formal protocol would help broker arrangements to satisfy farmer's interests at all times and ensure all parties' needs were met, while respecting individual landholders.

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Photo caption: Northam Nygungar Kiel Attwell (left) and WWF Healthy Bushland Project Officer Phil Lewis put their backs into a recent gnamma clean-up in Derdibin as part of a combined Aboriginal cultural and environmental program to restore ancient Wheatbelt watering holes.

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