

Explorers' trek spurs environmental study

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Four avid adventurers spent time earlier this week in Kerang looking at the environmental changes to the area since the Burke and Will expedition 150 years ago.

Ben Beeton, Steve Broomhall, Michael Dillon and Jonathan King spent three days in the region as part of a three-month trek to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The four party members have united for the 4200-kilometre expedition that will retrace the journey Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills took to become the first people to travel from southern to northern Australia.

The expedition is supported by Australian actor Jack Thompson, who will join the team at certain sections of the trip.

"We are using the great story of Burke and Wills to teach Australians about the environment and how it can be fixed so the area can produce food for the population for the next 150 years," Dr King said.

Each individual has a specific responsibility for the expedition, which is being conducted by road and boat compared to by foot and hoof 150 years ago.

Dr King is spending the journey interviewing residents and local experts for a report that will be passed onto the Federal Department of Environment, as well as the Victorian, New South Wales and Queensland governments.

"When Burke and Wills set off 150 years ago there was useable land and water to grow food," Dr King said.

"In the last 150 years we have overused the land and water, and exploited our resources too much."

Mr Beeton is working on a series of ecological drawings for Cultural Victoria that will become part of an ongoing school-based program.



Jonathan King, Steve Broomhall, Ben Beeton and Michael Dillon visited Kerang earlier this week as part of the Burke and Wills Environmental Expedition.

The ecological artist will use his works to study the difference in the landscape from 150 years ago to now, as well as the "deep-time history" of the trek's location.

"It is important to understand the history of the environment, not just by modern time but also by deep time," Mr Beeton said.

"The trip to Melbourne to the Gulf is 4200 kilometres, but if you divide that by the age of the Earth, which is 4.5 billion years, approximately one year equals one millimetre."

Mr Broomhall is the trek's operations manager, whilst Mr Dillon is documenting the journey for a program that will feature on the Seven/Prime networks in the coming

months.

During their short stay in the area Dr King interviewed local Department of Primary Industries representative Rob O'Brien, Laurie Martin and Ollie Jane regarding the health of the Loddon River.

"The one thing about the Loddon is that it has been degraded so much with man-made dams and reservoirs that have affected the flow.

Land clearing and the introduction of carp to the river have not helped either, according to Dr King.

"Laurie said that there were days when you could catch at least 70 fish a day in the Loddon," he said.

There were positive stories though, with Mr Jane explaining to Dr King how he was able to restore the land on his property through good grazing and cropping practices.

The group also met Fern Hanes, who is the state's native fish strategy coordinator.

Discussions focused on what needed to be done to encourage Murray cod and silver perch populations to thrive in the river.

"If you have healthy fish populations, you have a healthy river," Dr King said.

The group have also been impressed by the friendliness and hospitality of local residents.

Boort resident Paul Haw provided three nights of accommodation at Camp Slade, and the group gained a greater understanding about local red gum forests.

"I have found local residents to be exceptionally friendly; it feels like we are in the outback already," Dr King said.

The group agree that the efforts of local residents to look after the environment are inspiring.

"These residents are knowledgeable too; Rob and Paul could write books themselves on the information they have," Dr King said.

"We do have an environmental crisis, but if people learnt from local residents there will be a difference."

Local companies and environmental experts are welcome to support the expedition by providing sponsorship or travelling with the group.

For more information contact Dr King on 0419 495 732.

Mr Beeton's images created so far during the trip are available at www.benbeeton.com.au.

People wishing to learn more about the expedition can visit www.burkeandwills2010.blogspot.com

Community commemorates Burke and Wills visit

