



Carolyn Mueller, left, a DePauw University junior studying abroad in Australia through AustraLearn, joined other AustraLearn volunteers in March to pull out invasive weeds in Anna Bay near Port Stephens as part of a volunteer weekend organized by Conservation Volunteers Australia. Photo by Carolyn Mueller

### *Volunteering to learn*

# A Lasting Impression

## **AustraLearn students from the United States and Canada give back while studying abroad in Australia**

**By Stacey Hartmann**

One weekend this semester in three environmentally unique areas of Australia, U.S. college students studying abroad through AustraLearn pushed aside fears of the Australian bushlands in pursuit of a feeling.

It is the personal satisfaction that comes from serving others regardless of comfort or compensation.

### **Volunteer days add up**

AustraLearn in 2003 began offering its program participants a chance to volunteer for conservation projects coordinated by Conservation Volunteers Australia. From inception through 2007, more than 1,800 AustraLearn students from the United States and Canada have participated throughout Australia, contributing more than 6,200 volunteer days and more than \$1 million (AUD) in volunteer labor.

Despite being covered in dirt, sweat and sand, Carolyn Mueller, a 21-year-old junior from DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind., got that satisfied feeling during her March 14-16 volunteer weekend tearing out invasive weeds in Anna Bay in Port Stephens, New South Wales.

"I wanted a chance to learn more about conservation issues in Australia, as well as give back to my host nation," says Mueller, who participated with other AustraLearn students on behalf of Conservation Volunteers Australia, a 25-year-old conservation program.

"It was quite a bit of physical effort while we were on site," says Mueller, who is from St. Louis, "but that was part of the fun and part of the challenge."

## Meeting conservation needs inland

That same weekend, 20-year-old Nelson Vang of St. Paul, Minn., finally got his wish to see the Australian bush outside the University of Melbourne, where he is studying civil engineering for one semester.

Vang's three-pronged conservation assignment included cleaning out an old cabin, and pulling out weeds and planting native plants in two different locations in a national park.

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Although the sun beat down relentlessly on Vang's group the first day, rewards came in the form of gorgeous scenery and accommodations that went way beyond camping to include kitchenettes and beds.

"The actual trip satisfied my expectations, because I had a great time," says Vang, a third-year civil engineering major at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, "and I was able to do what I signed up to do -- help make a difference in Australia."

At the same time at yet another location two hours from the Gold Coast, Kelsey Comeau tried to shake off the effects of a windy four-wheel drive into a place called the Wild Mountains, where her group readied to extend a fire trail for farmers needing to do control burns on invasive weeds.

"We had to build -- well I guess dig -- the next 100 meters," says Comeau, a junior international studies major at Colorado State University. "We were all out there in rough terrain, clearing thick vegetation and making a nice smooth path."

Comeau's arms were tired by the end of the day, but she wouldn't trade the experience.

“If it helps just a tiny bit,” says Comeau, studying general electives for one semester at Griffith University – Gold Coast Campus, “then I’m satisfied that I gave back to Australia.”

## More students serving to learn

Comeau, Vang and Mueller are a few of the growing number of students asking for opportunities to dedicate at least a portion of their study abroad experiences to giving instead of receiving.

Volunteerism abroad involves students participating in shorter, more focused efforts. “Service learning,” on the other hand, represents lengthier programs of academic study combining experiential learning and community service.

For students unable to participate in a service-learning program, shorter volunteer opportunities can provide a great addition to a general study abroad program.

Both approaches in overseas education are on the rise as younger generations, increasingly aware of the global issues of environmental conservation, poverty, human rights and public health, request more opportunities to make a difference while studying overseas.

AustraLearn, a leading provider of study abroad programs in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific, started looking about six years ago for ways for its students to give back to their host countries.

“Australia has been a wonderful place both for our students and to our students,” says Shelia Houston, director of Australia and New Zealand operations for AustraLearn. “We wanted to involve them in the communities and do something helpful and positive. It also gives the students the opportunity to come back in later years and see the impact of their work.”

So AustraLearn, a Westminster, Colo.-based company with an 18-year history of sending overseas 18,000 students from the United States and Canada, went about researching various conservation project opportunities.

It eventually settled on a partnership with Conservation Volunteers, which since 1982 has attracted and managed a force of volunteers in practical conservation projects for the betterment of Australia and New Zealand.

“At that time, AustraLearn was a leader in providing this type of experience for international education,” says Joanne Davies, program manager for Conservation Volunteers.

Since that time, “we have seen the AustraLearn program grow and improve each year,” Davies says. “In addition to the regular three-day

### Conservation snapshot

AustraLearn students in calendar 2007 worked with Conservation Volunteer Australia to contribute 873 volunteer days equaling \$139,680 (AUS) in volunteer labor.

#### The results:

- 1,531 trees, shrubs and grasses planted
- 49,199 square meters of weeds removed
- 200 plants propagated
- 67 kilometers of walking track constructed
- 22 kilometers of environmental survey work
- 2,100 square meters trash removed

conservation camps, CVA also now provides a number of short-course camps to AustraLearn students for specific educational learning components.”

Interest in the conservation volunteer weekends by AustraLearn students, who pay nothing extra to participate, continues to rise each year, Houston says.

To support the interest, AustraLearn makes a significant annual commitment of about \$85,000 in program costs, as well as some additional staffing costs.

“Most students rave about the program,” Houston says, “though some students have commented that they’ve had to work harder than they’d expected. It’s a program for people who are really prepared to get involved.”

For those who are ready to take on the challenge, there is no shortage of work, Davies says.

“Thankfully there is an increasing supply of volunteers,” she says, “which is always welcomed due to the level of conservation projects that are needed across Australia.”

## **Sweat, sore muscles and results**

AustraLearn student volunteers are making an impact on the Australian environment that is real and quantifiable.

In 2007, AustraLearn participants provided 873 volunteer days equaling \$139,680 (AUS) in volunteer labor, according to CVA.

Among the project sites were Wingello State Forest, Werri Beach Lagoon, Commonderry Wetlands, Australian Walkabout Wildlife Park and Kangaroo Valley.

In these and other areas, the student volunteers removed weeds, planted and maintained native trees, shrubs and grasses, constructed and repaired walking track and removed trash.

In exchange for their sore muscles and sweat, they got to visit remote areas they might otherwise never see, learn about Australia’s unique environmental challenges, and experience the dynamic of a group volunteer accomplishment, Houston says.



**AustraLearn students take a break from their volunteer effort in Anna Bay, where they were treated to stunning scenery and wildlife.** Photo by Carolyn Mueller

“They interact with local people they ordinarily would not have the opportunity to meet,” she adds, “and they physically work hard and see their results, something many young people have yet to experience.”

With service learning, the buzzwords of “self-reflection” and “self-discovery” absolutely come into play, Houston says.

But what may be most important is the new perspective and enriched understanding of the world that comes from getting up close to the challenges facing other countries and their populations.

“An assumption can be made,” Houston says, “that this will promote a greater global understanding and acceptance of other cultures.”

### **Battling weeds in blue water paradise**

As Mueller prepared to work at Anna Bay, she heard a comprehensive safety briefing from the Conservation Volunteers team leader in preparation for the day’s activities. She and the others wore long sleeves, pants and hats to protect themselves.

“It was definitely hard work,” Mueller says, “and often very hot.”

By day’s end, her knees hurt after hours spent ripping out invasive morning glory, lantana and bitou bush, weeds of national significance to the Australian government because of their threat to the environment.

But the payoffs were many, including new friendships, stunning scenery that included sand dunes and dolphins, and the presence of kookaburras and lorikeets at the campsite.

“I felt like this whole trip -- as amazing as it has been -- has been a bit selfish,” says Mueller, whose six months studying Australian history, Australian literature, ceramics and Aboriginal studies at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, ends in June. “It’s been all about me and what I want to do in Australia. I wanted a chance to do something for someone else.”

Through her volunteer weekend, Mueller says she’s gained a much greater knowledge about conservation efforts in Australia, especially the country’s challenges with drought.

“There are water saving habits that I’ll probably bring back with me,” she says.

She believes her group made a real difference, too.

“In a few years, the plants we planted will be able to grow and breed in that area,” she says.

“I also think we made a difference in that we were working at a highly visible site,” she adds. “There were plenty of beachgoers passing us since it was a weekend. They may have seen us working and been inspired to do their own part to help the environment.”

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