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News

Discovering the desert

Castlemaine local and award-winning radio producer and podcaster **Alison Hanly** is getting set to launch a new series about Desert Discovery. Her show, *Saltgrass*, airs on MainFM and most podcast apps, and focuses on sustainability, climate, nature, conservation, and how everyday people get involved. There are more than 100 episodes to listen to about our central Victorian community as well as this new series about Desert Discovery. In this piece, Alison shares some insights into her Desert Discovery experience...

How much do you know about the Australian Outback, the Red Centre?

The Great Australian desert is made of many interconnected desert eco-systems, each with their own unique features and names. Together they stretch from the coast of Western Australia right through the centre of the continent, until it butts into the Murray-Darling Basin and the Great Dividing Range on the East Coast.

About 18 per cent of Australia is classified as desert — that's almost one fifth of the continent. If you include arid and semi arid regions that number jumps up to 70 per cent of the Australian mainland. Australia is the driest inhabited continent on earth.

As much as it dominates the country, only three per cent of Australians live in the desert and most Australians have never been inland to see it, 87 per cent of Australia's population live within 50km of the coast.

Like most Aussies, I dreamed of taking that trip one day — doing the big lap driving the loop around Australia mostly along the coast, but also, going into the red centre, seeing Uluru. But, like most Aussies, I'd never gotten around to doing it. I had travelled to south-east Asia a couple of times, I'd been to Europe and America but I had never ventured into the vast interior of my own country.

It wasn't until I met someone involved in Desert Discovery, that I really thought about it seriously.

Desert Discovery is a not-for-profit group that organises a trip out to a very remote desert location every two years.

The people involved are all volunteers, covering their own expenses. Once out on site, they break into teams, like botany, invertebrates, birds or mammals and reptiles. Each team has their own methods and processes and all of the data is ultimately shared with museums and universities.

I was invited to join their 2022 project in Yeo Lake Nature Reserve, Western Australia. It was a rare opportunity to get out into the desert with an interesting group of people.

I wasn't sure if anything would come of it, but I took along my sound recorder and my camera. I wasn't there to observe nature, but rather to observe the observers. Capturing as much as I could about this amazing group of people, what they were finding and how they were finding it.

I asked all the questions of a non-ecologist, non-scientist. Luckily everyone there had a wonderfully generous attitude and loved sharing knowledge.

Since then, I have spent the last few years sifting through hundreds of hours of audio and video to make the latest season of *Saltgrass*, all about Desert Discovery.

Each episode focuses on a different team and shares stories of people's lives. We discuss citizen science, what they love about

the desert and, of course, the animals and plants they were finding out there.

Saltgrass airs on MainFM at 9am on Monday mornings and is available on most podcast apps.

To find out more at saltgrasspodcast.com and desertdiscoveryinc.com.au

Alison has also just received funding

create a season of *Saltgrass* around the Harcourt fires. She wants to talk to people from both Harcourt and Castlemaine and unpack experiences before, during and after.

How people prepared, or didn't, how they responded in the moment and what thoughts and feelings it has left them with. Stay tuned for more details on this soon.



Alison Hanly's Desert Discovery experience took her to the Yeo Lake Nature Reserve in Western Australia.

Did you catch the latest **Castlemaine Mail**





Councillors juggle Camp concerns

Tuesday's monthly council meeting was more akin to a three-ringed circus than a local government meeting. Community members from both sides of the controversial Camp Reserve debate filled the gallery, making their presence known by muttering their disapproval and applauding the councillors' performances.



Trailblazers honoured

Castlemaine-based artist Laura Woodward has installed *Wildflowers*, a permanent public artwork celebrating seven women who helped shape the region's cultural life. Known as the First Ladies of the Castlemaine Art Museum, the group established the organisation in 1913.



Maccas petition gains traction

A petition against McDonald's bid to open a new restaurant on land located at the corner of Forest and Hargraves Streets in Castlemaine is fast gaining momentum. The petition on the Change.org platform had garnered 1390 signatures at the time of going to press.

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