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"Twenty years from now you'll be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." — Mark Twain

Come! Sit! Stay!

Research your holiday and make a difference to our planet – Lisa Treen points out some eco adventures.

Lazy, dreamy holidays are very high on my wish list. Those long, selfish summer breaks lounging around, reading a pile of books and taking time out with those I love around me. Over this holiday season I pondered the opposite of lazy and selfish and discovered that there's a new breed of holiday that is both active and gives something back to the environment. It didn't take me long to find such an organisation that offers ordinary members of the public the opportunity to participate in extraordinary scientific and research work—all while having a holiday.

Earthwatch is an international, non-profit organisation engaging people worldwide in scientific field research and education to promote the understanding necessary for a sustainable environment. In Australia there are a number of projects that offer exotic locations at the frontline of conservation. You don't need any special skills to participate, just a willing spirit and sense of adventure.



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Australia's Vanishing Frogs

Less than two hours north of Sydney, there's a mystery that scientists need help piecing together—why amphibians are dying faster than any other species of vertebrates. The research site is in the lush upland forest of the Watagan Mountains (the Hunter Region). Teams are needed to find out why some frogs are dying while others are flourishing—the object being not just documenting these cases but finding solutions. In the past 20 years it's estimated that nine endemic Australian frogs have disappeared (presumed extinct) and other species are declining at an alarming rate. On a more positive note Earthwatch volunteers have contributed to the discovery of four new species of frog and have identified healthy frog populations.

The accommodation for this expedition is far from five-star as it's essentially bush camping. Tents are supplied and sleep two to three persons with group cooking facilities. You need to supply your own sleeping bag and pillow and we understand why this expedition is held over the warmer months—the showers are not heated.

Expeditions can be for a discovery weekend or weeklong stay and this is suitable for families. All meals are included in the cost and special dietary needs can be catered for.

Water birds of the Coorong

This South Australian destination is another project where families with children are encouraged. There are several external factors that now impinge on the ecology of the Coorong. Changes in the patterns and volumes of water flowing down the Murray which is due to regulation of the river and use of water by humans. This has affected the ecology of the Murray and its associated wetlands.

Over the last six years, there has been a decline in non-migratory waterbirds using the Coorong—these include various ducks, and fish-eating birds like Pelicans, Grebes and Terns. These reflect significant reductions in aquatic plants and small fish. Volunteers needn't get their feet wet every day but tasks include some bird banding and reptile trapping and you'll need to be good at counting birds. This is a magic area and was the location for the movie 'Storm Boy'.

Accommodation consists of cabins or units with double beds and bunks with a kitchenette and self-contained bathroom. All meals are catered for with the evening meal predominantly featuring barbeque style meals. If all the walking and research hasn't worn you out, the location also has tennis courts and a small indoor pool.



Now you see it...

Whale Sharks of Ningaloo Reef

Ever wanted to snorkel in pristine waters next to a graceful and gentle giants of the deep? The beautiful Ningaloo Marine Park is home to Australia's largest fringing reef and the massive Whale Shark. This Western Australian location is one of the best places in the world where you can get close to these huge creatures. Whale Sharks are listed as being vulnerable to extinction and prior to the mid 1980s there has been less than 350 confirmed sightings worldwide.

The reef stretches over 300 kms and other inhabitants that you're likely to see include dolphins, reef sharks, manta rays, marine turtles, over 200 species of coral and the occasional killer or humpback whale—that's just in the water. On land the friendly locals include emus, kangaroos, the occasional monitor lizard and an abundance of bird life.

Your average day will be spent on a research vessel gathering plankton as you search for the whale sharks. Once sighted you'll be expected to snorkel with them, photographing individuals and the other species they swim with, recording their behaviours. Earthwatch's research helps us understand the whale shark's natural habitat, migratory patterns and diet in a non-invasive way.

The accommodation is more luxurious as all volunteers stay at the Best Western SeaBreeze Resort in Exmouth which is about 30 kilometers from the research site. The resort has a swimming pool, heated spa, restaurant and free wireless high-speed Internet connection. The research site also has wireless Internet that you can access in your spare time. All meals are included and you'll be sharing in the meal preparation as well.

An Earthwatch expedition offers you the chance to explore parts of our country you might otherwise never see, to amaze yourself by the things you can do and to get your hands dirty in the name of making the world a better place. The only drawback to all these eco-tourist/volunteer adventures is that you can't drag your dog along.

To find out more information and details on costs call Earthwatch Phone: (03) 9686 6828 or visit <http://www.earthwatch.org>

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