



MEDIA RELEASE

Teachers find new species in far north Queensland

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Thirteen new species of spider, rare fish and orchids have been discovered on the Olkola people's traditional lands on the Cape York Peninsula in Queensland.

Scientists, teachers and Indigenous rangers have been scouring Olkola Country for the past 10 days as part of the latest Bush Blitz. Bush Blitz is a pioneering nature-discovery partnership between the Australian Government, BHP Billiton Sustainable Communities and Earthwatch Australia.

Five teachers have joined more than a dozen scientists and the Olkola Indigenous rangers, to act as research assistants, as part of the Bush Blitz TeachLive experience.

Queensland Museum's Head of Terrestrial Biodiversity Dr Robert Raven and PhD student Renan Castro Santana led the 'spider team' through the thickets of Olkola.

Leslie Carr from Maribyrnong Primary School, ACT and Tony Egar from Cornerstone College, South Australia joined Dr Raven and Renan on their quest for spiders.

"My most exciting day was when I learnt to dig up spiders. I knew nothing about them in the morning and by the afternoon I was capable of digging up three spiders successfully all by myself - one of which turned out to be a new species of brush-footed trapdoor spider, which was very exciting," Leslie Carr said.

Tony Egan and Dr Raven showed-off some of the spiders they found to Tony's students via a skype session.

"My students were really excited to interact with scientists who are experts in their field, and to see the specimens I had collected with them. It's great to be able to connect children with the cutting edge of scientific discovery," Tony Egan said.

Leslie and Tony are two of five teachers carefully selected from over 50 applicants from around Australia to participate in the blitz as part of Bush Blitz TeachLive.

Earthwatch Australia Deputy CEO and Director of Programmes Cassandra Nichols said TeachLive enables teachers to take part in scientific research while sharing their experiences through a dedicated website.

"This Olkola expedition is the third time we have involved teachers in a survey through the Bush Blitz TeachLive project, and it was a huge success," Ms Nichols said.

"The excitement of the teachers has been tangible, and they're passing that enthusiasm for nature straight back to their students, through blogs, skype and communication forums.

"Sue Webber from Kalgoorlie Boulder, Western Australia is already planning a mini Bush Blitz with her school upon return and has been liaising with our scientists to make this happen. It's great to see the program having such an immediate impact."

Other discoveries on Olkola included a fish find that could help unlock a new species.



Dr Michael Hammer from the Museum and Art Gallery NT said this is the 6th Bush Blitz he has collected fish and the second time he has collected this type of fish in the Top End, called a Delicate Blue-eye.

“When I saw this little guy I knew straight away he was different from the fish in the Northern Territory. We are confident this group is more than just one species, but we need to find enough of them to be sure. This group of fish is like a big puzzle and we have finally found the missing piece which will help us unlock how many different species there are. It’s exciting to be on the brink of a new fish species,” Dr Hammer said.

Additionally, in surveying the flora of the area botanists have recorded more than 50 plant species for the first time on this property, including a rare orchid.

The scientists are from all over the country, and include representatives from Queensland Museum, James Cook University and Australian Tropical Herbarium, Museum and Art Gallery NT, QLD Parks and Wildlife Services, University of NSW and the National Herbarium of NSW. They have been working with the Olkola Aboriginal Corporation and traditional owners who manage the national park.

The Olkola people are the traditional owners of almost one million hectares of land in south central Cape York Peninsula and own and manage over 800,000Ha. The majority of their managed lands are largely un-surveyed by western scientific methods. They have a strong desire to work with scientists to understand the values and inform land management decisions.

Olkola Aboriginal Corporation, Chairman, Mike Ross said: “I’m grateful for the scientists coming out here and working with us. Combining traditional knowledge and western scientist’s methods to manage our lands is the way forward and we look forward to continuing to work with them.”

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment, Bob Baldwin MP, said Bush Blitz was a model partnership between government, business, scientists, not-for-profits and communities.

“All of these partners have contributed tremendously to this species discovery programme and its many successes. By filling the gaps in our biodiversity knowledge, Bush Blitz is helping to underpin our conservation efforts for a generation to come,” he said.

In the last five years, Bush Blitz has discovered more than 900 new species, located another 250 threatened species, and recorded 12,000 types of plants and animals in areas where they were previously unknown.

Following the survey resources will be made available to the scientists to complete the taxonomic – the science of identifying and naming species – laboratory work and results from the expedition will be shared with the traditional owners and Olkola Aboriginal Corporation.

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