



MEDIA RELEASE

An unexpected find in the heart of the Gibson Desert

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Bush Blitz scientists investigating a fresh water oasis in the very heart of the Gibson Desert have found a tiny snail that could be new to science.

With the help of the Kiwirrkurra Aboriginal community, a team of 20 scientists have spent the last two weeks looking for new species in Australia's most remote Indigenous Protected Area, Kiwirrkurra. It's all part of the country's largest nature discovery project, Bush Blitz.

Bush Blitz is a pioneering nature-discovery partnership between the Australian Government, BHP Billiton Sustainable Communities and Earthwatch Australia.

When most of us think of snails we think of slimy garden pests devouring our lettuces, but Australia is home to over a thousand native snail species, many smaller than a grain of rice.

The Western Australian Museum's Corey Whisson said while the common garden snail is an introduced species, native snails are usually far smaller and more beautiful.

"They mostly eat native leaf litter or algae. They can also be incredibly small, so when the area we are surveying is 42,000 square kilometres, finding a tiny snail is like finding a needle in a haystack the size of Belgium," he said.

"Kiwirrkurra rangers have been helping me find the snails, their local knowledge is invaluable."

The Kiwirrkurra people have been an integral part of the survey effort, as they work alongside the scientists and share their deep local knowledge.

Dr Alan Yen from La Trobe University and the Victorian Department of Economic Development said he can't undertake his research without the help of the Kiwirrkurra women.

"I'm studying the witchetty grub and how it's used as a food source by the Indigenous people" said Alan.

"Witchetty grubs are high in protein and fats and have always been an important food source for these communities, but very little is known about the grub itself. We don't even know how many species there are and what species the different types of grubs turn into."

Bush Blitz manager Jo Harding said the region was one of the most understudied in the country.

"With only about 25 per cent of Australia's total biodiversity known to science, this area is like a giant black hole in our knowledge," she said.



The Kiwirrkurra people declared their land an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) in September 2014, joining a vast network of Aboriginal landowners managing their country for both cultural and environmental conservation across Australia.

Kate Crossing from Central Desert Native Title Services said there had been a real buzz in the community in the past fortnight of the blitz.

“The rangers and elders have been sharing their deep knowledge of plants, animals and landscapes with the Bush Blitz scientists, and learning so much in return. The partnerships that have been built will be invaluable in continuing to look after the very special values of this country, from rare snails to iconic threatened species like the bilby,” she said.

The scientists came from all over the country, and included representatives from the Western Australian Museum and Herbarium, the Northern Territory Herbarium, Queensland Museum, La Trobe University and the University of NSW, The Victorian Department of Economic Development, the Australian National Herbarium and the WA Department of Parks and Wildlife. They have been working with Central Desert Native Title Services and Tjambu Tjambu Aboriginal Corporation that manage the Kiwirrkurra Indigenous Protected Area.

Photos of the snail, Corey Whisson and Michael Reid, Dr Alan Yen and the Kiwirrkurra rangers are available.

Media contacts:

Parks Australia: Miranda Schooneveldt
(02) 6274 1276 or 0439 582 686