

Tell us about yourself

Hello, my name's Katie Ronald. I'm the National Volunteer Program Coordinator for Bush Heritage Australia. I've worked for Bush Heritage for coming up to 3 years now and when I started the Cert IV, I was in a different role. I was the Volunteer Coordinator for the West region looking after all our volunteer placements in WA and South Australia.

Tell us about Bush Heritage Australia

Bush Heritage buy and manage land for conservation, and we partner with Aboriginal people and other land holders such as farmers to help them plan and achieve their conservation goals on their lands as well.

How do you involve volunteers at Bush Heritage Australia?

Volunteers are involved at all levels of our programs within our organisation. We've got around 1400 volunteers in our pool and we offer episodic volunteering for the majority of our placements. We're in a really unique position within Bush Heritage that we can rely solely on that pool of volunteers, and we rarely need to advertise externally to fill our placements.

Our volunteers come from a range of different backgrounds. We've got 1400 volunteers that are active within our pool, and we've got about 500 to 600 of them that will be out on placement each year and we do about 46,000 hours a year, which is phenomenal across the organisation. They are from a lot of students that are in university either in their third or fourth years, they want to get a bit of field experience, through to retirees and people that have got a bit of extra time on their hands.

Like a lot of conservation organisations, unfortunately we miss that middle demographic of people that are working full-time, that have got kids at home. That's where we want to pick them up with our home-based volunteering and we want to be diversifying the options that they can have to volunteer, so that as they get a bit older and have more time on their hands, they can then look at other ways they can volunteer with Bush Heritage.

What do you love about working with volunteers?

What I've always loved about working with volunteers is matching them to a role that they are going to enjoy, that they are going to get benefit from, and that is also going to have organisational benefit.

I have an example of this that happened just yesterday that made me so excited. We had a volunteer that contacted me a couple of weeks ago, he has just recently retired from working in Parks and Wildlife in NSW and wanted to still be using his skills, wanted to be getting back out into the bush, and just through the conversation that we had, he told me that he has experience in data analysis – and the platform that he has experience in is a platform we have just brought into Bush Heritage.

So that immediately piqued my interest and I said, "Look, we've got this Survey123 that we've just started using to collect our data...Would that be something you might be interested in, is helping our data team in the implementation of that?"

I just received the email yesterday that he's met with our data team, that it's absolutely aligned with what he's looking for and what the data team are looking for, and they're going to get him involved in helping with that platform and rolling it out.

That is what I've always loved, is learning about what a volunteer is looking for and what they're interested in, and then knowing across the organisation what opportunities we've got and what I can match them for,

that they're going to love and they're going to get a lot out of, and that is going to make the organisation love volunteers even more than they already do.

Why did you join the Certificate IV program?

I started the Certificate IV in Coordination of Volunteer Programs in early 2021. I've been in volunteer management and conservation for just on 10 years at that time and I had no formal qualifications, like most of us. I fell into volunteer management, like most of us, and I knew there were gaps in my knowledge.

I knew that I wasn't utilising the National Standards as well as I could be. I didn't know what I didn't know. So, when the Certificate IV came up, I thought it would be a great opportunity to fill in those knowledge gaps and I loved the fact that I could use my real work in all of my assessments, that it was work that I was doing to contribute to my day-to-day work.

I was able to use the assessments to progress the projects I was working on within Bush Heritage and it was really fulfilling knowing that I wasn't doing an assessment for the assessment's sake and to be able to get the qualification, that it was also helping me with my day-to-day work as well.

How has the Certificate IV program changed how you work day-to-day?

Yeah, there's a lot of things that I've used from the Certificate IV that I use in my day-to-day work. A lot of the communication techniques were a good reminder.

About six months into doing the Certificate, I moved into the national role, so I then had a team underneath me that I was managing. I think there were two Communication modules that we did, and they were really, really useful in helping me to mentor my team, helping me to lead them, helping me to guide them.

There was also the Diversity and Inclusion module as well. That really showed me how much more we could be doing in Bush Heritage, what I now, moving into that national role, want to change, and how I want to make the organisation more inclusive and be able to offer more volunteering opportunities to different people who may not have considered Bush Heritage to be an organisation that they would want to volunteer for.

How has the Certificate IV program helped you become more diverse and inclusive?

Some of the steps that we've taken to implement our diversity and inclusion is the accessibility of our website. We've had a revamp of our volunteer page to talk about the different types of volunteering that we offer, so people that are thinking reserve volunteering and going into remote locations might not be for them can see that there are those other opportunities as well.

I also make sure I have that phone call with every single volunteer. It was something that I was hesitant to do at the beginning because of the amount of time that it does take, but after the things that I've learnt through the Certificate, I realised it's really valuable to have that phone call with volunteers to understand their motivations, to be able to set expectations about what we can offer, and to be able to talk through different opportunities that we might be able to work through with them.

But then, if they're not the right fit for us, it's then all the other organisations I can refer them onto as well that they can go and volunteer for instead.

What would you say to anyone thinking about joining the Certificate IV program?

If you're thinking about doing the Cert IV and you've come from a tertiary background, the last time I was learning at university and it's very, very different. I was very unaware that there's so much flexibility with

the Cert IV, especially to work around your work commitments or things that might come up in your personal life.

I had amazing support when I needed, if I felt ill and I needed to push out deadlines of assessments and things like that. But also, the level of complexity of your answers, I got a lot of great support from the team in Cert IV on whether I needed to scale back my answers, whether I needed to include more information.

The assessors were really good at providing that clarification, so that you're not doing pages' and pages' more work than you needed to be doing, if you're coming from that tertiary background.

What advice would you give Volunteer Managers?

What I've learned is the value of the knowledge that your volunteers have. That they have come from so many different industries, so many different backgrounds and they have so much knowledge that they want to share.

We have a volunteer advisory committee within Bush Heritage that supports our volunteer program. It's made up of 6 volunteers plus our team, and I'm just blown away all the time by our commitment, our enthusiasm, the ideas they have, the knowledge that they bring from their careers that might be completely different to conservation, might not even be within the environmental sector. It still transfers to the work that we're working on.

Even in the day-to-day of our placements of having our volunteers on our properties, it is the passion that they have and the knowledge that they bring to our Reserve Staff. We may have volunteers that have been visiting properties for years and years and years and they've seen Reserve Staff come and go and come and go. They've just got this historical knowledge.

I think it's so important to value those volunteers who have got that length of service within your organisation, and to really embrace that, and to nurture it and. to make them feel that they are valued and that the staff coming in are not going to be threatened by them, that they are not going to have to be worried about having their feet stepped on.

You know, it's really embracing what they know and having them mentor those new staff coming through to share that knowledge, because we're all here for the same thing. No matter what sector you're in, you've got those values that align with that organisation.