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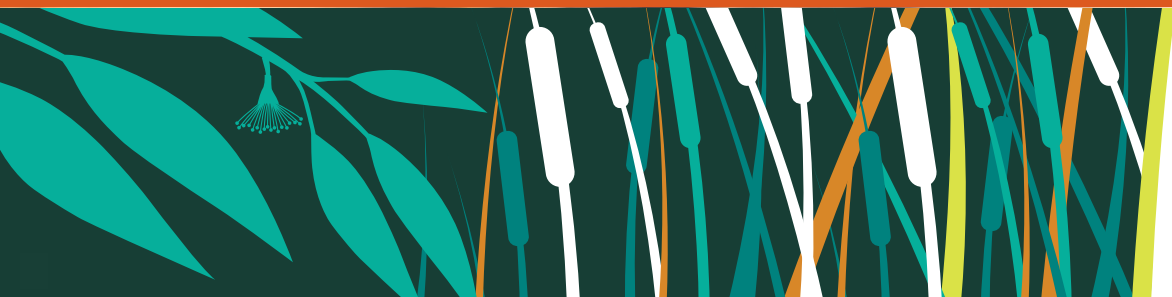
Hattah Matters

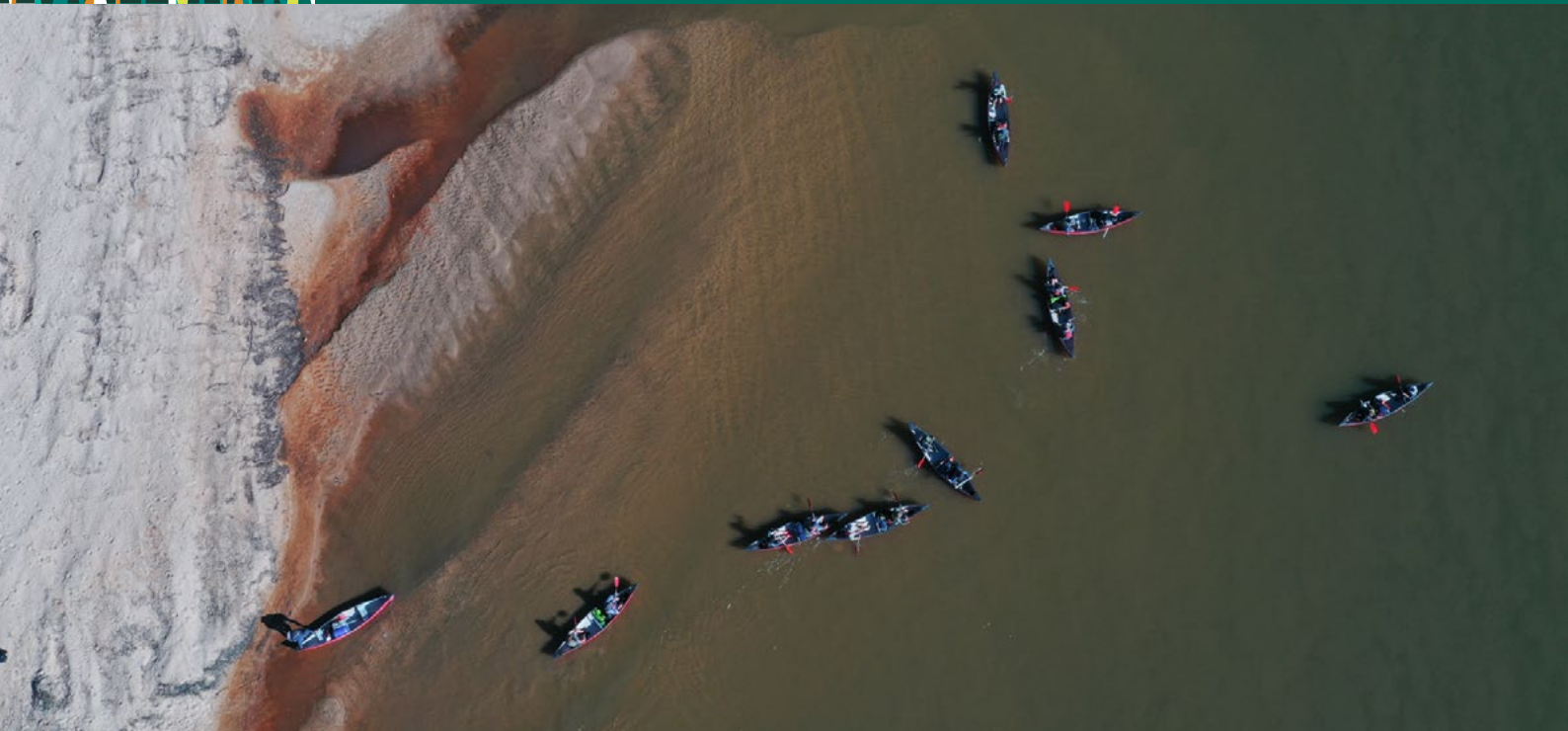
From Mornington to the Mallee: Woodleigh's rite of passage

CASE STUDY



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Ask any teenager what their idea of fun is – being dropped in the middle of the unforgiving Mallee scrub for 7 days, trekking through 100kms of unknown terrain on foot while carrying food and supplies on their backs is unlikely to make the list.

But for the year 10 students at Woodleigh School on the Mornington Peninsula, the Hattah Outdoor Expedition is a highly revered milestone, a welcome opportunity to be pushed to their physical and emotional limits and prove to themselves, their families, their school and their community that they are ready to take a stand and become leaders.

The expedition is a ritual steeped in tradition, a rite of passage, a transformative experience and a unique opportunity to quite literally walk in the footsteps of thousands of Woodleigh alumni that came before them.

Every year since 1986, 100 Woodleigh students have descended on the Ramsar listed Hattah-Kulkyne National Park to complete the trek, with Head of Outdoor Education Andrew Peach running the show for the last 10 years.

He said the selection of Hattah was “very deliberate”, with each group of students getting a different experience at Hattah based on the water levels of lakes throughout the park.

“Hattah is beautiful all year round, even when the lakes are dry – but when the Hattah lakes are full of water, it’s just truly a magnificent sight,” he said.

“The whole place just bursts alive with flora and fauna, birdlife and greenery. The baby emus wandering around, the wildflowers that bloom, the lush, green surrounds. Hattah just completely transforms and it’s an experience unlike any other.”

It’s a sentiment echoed by Mallee Catchment Management Authority Board Chair Allison McTaggart, who said the benefits of environmental watering range from ecological to financial and beyond.



“The filling of the lakes at Hattah is so vital, and it’s made possible by an environmental infrastructure package, installed as part of The Living Murray Program in 2012-13,” Allison said.

“Permanent environmental infrastructure, including pumps and regulators, has enabled water to be effectively and efficiently delivered to the system of inland lakes.

“This has resulted in significant increases in the population of Regent Parrots; major waterbird breeding events; and future plans to extend watering infrastructure to the northern lakes under the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project (VFMRP).

“The lakes support many threatened and rare native species and ensuring they receive water means the area remains a place the whole community can enjoy. Kayakers, campers, bird watchers, anglers and walkers are all reaping the benefits, along with the lakes and floodplains in the National Park at Hattah.”

Andrew said keeping the water flowing into Hattah is “vital” to maintain its beauty and diversity.

“I think it’s all part of the responsibility we as humans have, to care for and protect this wonderful place,” he said.

“The absolute beauty of Hattah is in its incredible diversity, and that’s a big part of why Woodleigh students have been coming here for almost 40 years.

“The kids get to experience this absolutely beautiful semi-arid lake system and environment which many of them are not used to and have never experienced before.

“One year, students can literally walk across the dry lakes, then a year or two later the lakes are inundated and that means they’re having to canoe across – it’s all part of the challenge and the experience!

“From dense Mallee scrub to open salt flats, from the huge River Red gums to the big patches of Belah, the landscape at Hattah can change almost instantly and I think that’s where the real beauty lies.

“You can feel the cultural history; you can sense it all around you the minute you step foot on the ground at Hattah and to me, that’s 100 per cent worth saving.”

