

OUTSTANDING IN THEIR FIELD

The annual Australian Geographic Society Awards recognise and encourage Australians who have achieved remarkable goals in conservation and adventuring.

WORDS: SARAH HINDER



Established in 1987, the Australian Geographic Society Awards recognise inspiring Australians who represent our greatest adventurers or who are dedicated to ground-breaking work in conservation. We talked to three recipients of the 2018 Awards to find out what drives such passion.

ATTICUS FLEMING LIFETIME OF CONSERVATION AWARD

During his 16 years as chief executive officer of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, Atticus Fleming dedicated his life to protecting Australia's endangered wildlife and habitats. From modest beginnings starting out as a small WA operation with the sole purpose of conserving Australian wildlife, Atticus saw the organisation grow to be the largest private owner of land for conservation in the world.

When asked what inspired him to make conservation his life's work, Atticus points to his childhood growing up in the small New South Wales country town of Bakers Swamp, south of Wellington. "Being immersed in nature every day – whether exploring the



hills or swimming in the creek – inspired in me a love for the Australian bush and its animals," he says. "People like Harry Butler and David Attenborough were also an important influence, showcasing how special Australia's wildlife is and how much of it we have already lost."

While Australia is one of the most important countries on the planet for wildlife, Atticus is quick to point out we have the worst mammal extinction rate in the world. "Feral cats kill more than a million native animals every night!" he says. "The continued loss of wildlife and habitats is a big risk to the very systems that give us clean air, clean water, productive soils and a friendly climate. Protecting our natural capital is the best way to ensure industries including agriculture, tourism and so on have a sustainable future.

"As a community we have caused a lot of damage, mostly because we didn't understand the consequences of our actions," he continues. "However we now know what happens when you take too much water out of our rivers, clear too much vegetation and fail to remove feral animals and weeds. So there should be no more excuses. The next 10 years are critical. We need more practical, on-ground action – especially against feral animals – based on good, sensible science."

Today the Australian Wildlife Conservancy manages 4.65 million hectares across Australia, including regions within the Kimberley and the Top End. Atticus has led the organisation in developing a new model for conservation, and has protected some of the largest remaining populations of many threatened species, including bilbies, numbats, Gouldian finches, purple-crowned fairy wrens, bridled nail-tail wallabies and more. "Recently the Australian Wildlife Conservancy and New South Wales National Parks reintroduced bilbies to the Pilliga, near Narrabri, which is a good example of how we can turn back the tide of extinctions," he says.



JADE HAMEISTER YOUNG ADVENTURER OF THE YEAR

This was the second time 17-year-old Jade Hameister took out the Young Adventurer Award, having also won in 2016 after becoming the youngest person ever to ski to the North Pole. In 2017, aged 15, she became the youngest woman ever to cross Greenland – the second largest polar ice cap on the planet. And last January she completed her "Polar Hat Trick" by reaching the South Pole from the Amundsen Coast, earning her the 2018 award. Her epic 37-day trek made her the youngest person ever to complete the journey unassisted and unsupported, the first Australian woman to do so, the youngest person to reach both Poles, and the youngest ever to complete the Polar Hat Trick.

Jade explains that she began preparing for her dream of undertaking polar quests from the age of 12, after becoming inspired on an expedition to Everest Base Camp. "I spent nearly every day in the gym for the next three years trying to build strength and muscle, as well as doing long endurance sessions, like dragging heavy car tyres behind me on the beach and using the same harness I would use on my actual expeditions to simulate dragging a sled."

Jade speaks candidly about the difficult parts of her incredible journeys, but her over-riding emotion is gratitude. "There were lots of hard parts, but they are also some of the things that I now miss the most about my polar expeditions," she says. "Being alone with just the voice in your head for nine to 10 hours a day was something I had never experienced before – and that voice was often negative and full of self-doubt. But I am now so grateful that I did it. Sharing a tent ▶

Conservation & Exploration

with my dad for almost 80 days, including training camps, when we were both physically and emotionally drained, was also very challenging – but we now have an amazingly strong bond because of it.”

For motivation in dark times Jade focused on “reminding myself to be grateful for having the opportunity to be chasing my dreams, and that it’s been a privilege to experience such incredibly beautiful places.” Now her message to other young women dreaming of adventure is clear: “We need to shift our focus from how we appear, to exploring the possibilities of what we can do. Don’t wait until you think you can do something perfectly, just get started and have a go.”

Reaching the South Pole was the culmination of three years of hard work and sacrifice. “For me the reward was in the journey, not in the achievement of the destination,” she says. I really miss the daily grind of working hard towards a big goal.” For now, though, her goals are closer to home. “I’m focused on Year 12,” Jade explains. “But I never want to stop exploring. It doesn’t always have to be an extreme expedition – it might be a new business or a new way to try and help solve an issue I care deeply about.”



Sophia receiving her award from the Duchess of Sussex

SOPHIA SKARPARIS

YOUNG CONSERVATIONIST OF THE YEAR

Committed to creating a plastic-free country, 15-year-old Sophia Skarparis started a petition pushing for a ban on plastic bags in New South Wales.

After smashing her original goal of 10,000 signatures, Sophia sent her petition to the State Parliament, where the issue was finally debated last October. Despite this, the New South Wales government continues to support a stance on having no ban on plastic bags.

“Labour is seeking bipartisan support for existing legislation that they already have on banning single-use plastic bags,” Sophia explains. “If this is not achieved, they are looking to go to the polls with this as an election issue.” New South Wales is now the only state in Australia that has failed to legislate against single-use plastic bags, leading the country in the nine billion plastic bags that end up in landfill and our oceans every year.

Throughout the process of lobbying for signatures, Sophia never lost her motivation, explaining that she received lots of support from environmental groups, individuals and organisations. “I believe my generation can be game-changers,” she says. “We are more conscious about the environment; we are actually seeing the negative impact on marine and bird life that plastic is having.”

As for what we as individuals can do to help the environment, Sophia has this advice: “Say no to single-use plastics. And educate yourself and others on plastic pollution and climate change.” **TB**