

## Change is good, in the wild and your career

Dr Ben Allen believes he has the best job in the world. He gets paid to camp, fish, hunt, and look for animals. It's every boy's dream and he loves it.

### What do you do and how did you get to where you are now?

I am a wildlife scientist who specialises in wildlife management. The research that I enjoy the most involves managing human-wildlife conflict.

Overall, wildlife management can be simple, like researching where an animal lives, or complex, like increasing the population of an endangered species. The focus of the research can also be narrow or broad. An example of a complex and broad area is the study of trophic cascades, which involves researching how changing something in one part of the food web will affect the rest of the web.

Early in my career, I specialised in the management of dingoes and wild dogs and their impact on sheep and cattle. I learned how to keep them away, how to cull them humanely, if needed, and how to deter them using guardian animals. However, as time went on, my interests broadened. I thought about how dingoes also impacted native animals and how the skills I developed could also be applied to coyotes, jackals, wolves or African wild dogs. Now I work on a range of animals in multiple countries researching many different aspects of wildlife management.

### What inspired your interest in this field?

I grew up in the outdoors and was the type of kid to come to school with a frog in my pocket. My year 2 teacher was a wildlife carer, so something was always being rehabilitated in our classroom. I was awoken to animal consciousness as a seven-year-old through comforting these distressed animals.

From there, my interest grew because my dad also worked with wildlife which made me realise that I could pursue this as a career. It became all I wanted to do. So I went to university, worked in many



## Dr Ben Allen

**Discipline:** Wildlife management

**Organisation:** Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Systems, University of Southern Queensland

### Degrees:

- Bachelor of Applied Science (Honours) in Wildlife Biology
- PhD in Dingo Ecology

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- Wildlife management
- Conservation
- Invasive species
- Human-wildlife conflict
- Trophic cascades

**Prize:** Queensland Young Tall Poppy Science Award winner 2019

different organisations, and now here I am at the University of the Southern Queensland.

### You've worked in industry, government and academia. How do they compare?

Firstly, if you want to do actual science as part of your job, you will need to get at least a bachelor's degree. Without one you can still get involved in



scientific research, but the role you can play will be limited.

After I got my bachelor's degree, I worked in the sugar cane industry as a pest animal scientist. The science was cool because I got to research how to stop little white grubs from killing the sugarcane, but on a day-to-day basis, my job was just digging holes. Though I got valuable experience, and don't lament that time at all, it just wasn't what I wanted to do.

I then went to government to work on dingoes in South Australia. In government, I was given a specific project which was determined by my managers, government policy, and the current focus of the day. Once the project was finished, I was assigned another. Like industry, the focus was narrow but the funding was reliable.

I stayed in government for 10 years before I shifted to academia where I've now been for 8 years. In academia it's been quite different. I can ask whatever questions I want, but I have to apply for grants to fund the research I am interested in.

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## What is something you want to tell people, but are rarely asked?

I want to talk more about animal ethics and animal welfare. What is right, wrong or permissible? Should we or shouldn't we do that? Is there a better way? Controversies happen because they touch on our individual ethics, but we need to have a global ecological perspective on the food web and our part in it.

People are conditioned to think that everything must live when everything will eventually die. It's the circle of life and we are an integral part of it. Humans are predators and competitors. When we eat meat, we kill animals. When we farm vegetables, our agriculture outcompetes other wildlife for space. Fields of grain and soy have very little wildlife because they can't survive when their habitat is destroyed. However, we aren't always conscious of this loss because we don't see it directly.

These ethical concepts directly reflect on how people feel about wildlife management and especially the management of invasive species. When I need to kill

an animal, it might not seem ethical, but the purpose is to balance the environment. If I don't kill some invasive species, they will kill many native species. Killing is essential, but it is important that we kill in a way that causes the least pain and suffering.

## What is your hope for the future?

What keeps me awake at night is science literacy. I hope that in the future there is a greater understanding of the evidence-based work that scientists carry out and the contribution science makes to solving problems.

With science literacy, you can explore the world yourself, tell the difference between correlation and causation, and know when people are trying to pull the wool over your eyes. It's important to be able to identify good science and we need that now more than ever.

## What advice would you give young people?

If you decide to get a Bachelor of Science, Applied Science or Environmental Science, know that it's transferable across many sectors. There will be mobility in your career and it's not uncommon for someone to go from government to university or from university to industry. There's variety of employment options out there, and you don't have to settle right away. Just remember, when you finish high school you will have 50-60 years of work ahead of you. You can spend 20 years in one field, become a globally recognised expert, then you can change fields, start again, and become an expert in that too. There's enough time to do that two, three or four times. Also, don't be afraid to continue your education, there's plenty of time for that too.

## You won a Queensland Young Tall Poppy Science Award. How did this benefit you?

I won the award in 2019, right before the COVID-19 pandemic so I didn't get quite the same opportunities at the onset, but it was still great to be recognised. One of the big benefits of winning the award was getting onto a list that gets referred to and shared for opportunities such as this case study. Getting recognition opens doors to future opportunities I don't even know about yet.

Additionally, winning this award gets my research out there. I learned ages ago that there's no point doing good science, then having it sit on a shelf. What makes a discovery cool and significant is how it's shared and used to make a difference.