

ABC South West with Jacqueline Lynch

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Jacqueline Lynch

The term peatlands gets thrown around. Their unusual systems because they only cover about three per cent of the Earth's surface and rely totally on water, which Australia isn't really known for, but these kind of peatlands are dotted around Busselton, Dunsborough, Margaret River, Augusta, and right through to Windy Harbour and Albany.

You would have heard about that big fire in the Dalyellup area south of Bunbury last year that burnt for about a year through the peatlands in that area. And if you're not, if you're kind of thinking, "what's a peatland? I don't really know too much about them".

Well, you're actually not alone, even researchers don't know too much about them. So they've launched a study and it has recently got a bit more funding. One of the collaborators of the study is the Southwest NRM. And Linda Metz is the Sustainability and Environment Lead there. Good morning Linda.

Linda Metz

So peatlands are really old systems. So some of them are likely to go back, sort of, you know, 8,000, 15,000 years, so very old systems. They're typically sort of occurring around areas where there's persistent water.

They are typically sort of defined by like low vegetation, low heath vegetation with a mix of, like, really herbaceous sort of plants. And the peats themselves, they form from decaying matter, over all of this long time frame. So they're a very slow forming system.

They're quite unique and have got some very special and unusual creatures associated with them.

Jacqueline Lynch

What kind of creatures?

Linda Metz

So typically things like rare plants and animals that we find, so things like the sunset frog and the Albany pitcher plant. So there'd be two sort of examples, but there's likely to be many others, including invertebrates, some of which we don't really know much about which is really part of this study.

Jacqueline Lynch

You're looking at peatlands across the South West to try and see if you can figure out a little bit more. What can studying tell us? What do you want to know?

Linda Metz



Yeah, great question. What we want to know, is broadly actually quite a few different things if we can.

We're trying to find out some of the key sort of elements, I guess, which is to do with things like their locations, so where they're broadly located. What makes them function and form the way that they do.

So particularly around their hydrology, we want to understand how dependant they are on water and how those water systems might change over time, particularly with climate change and how those particular peatland communities might be able to respond to that.

More about their soils, their carbon potential. So carbon sequestration they're known to hold quite high levels of carbon and so we want to know, again under a changing climate, what's going to be the impact if we lose them from the system?

You know what kind of impacts does that have? We want to know a bit more about their biodiversity. They're actually quite poorly studied. So while traditionally they haven't actually attracted a huge amount of research and so this is quite an important collaboration to try and yeah, unpack some of those key things.

And the ultimate goal for that is this bit of research is actually going to inform better management and better threat controls. So that's really where the NRMs come in.

Jacqueline Lynch

Well, what are what are the threats? Because I'm thinking of that fire in the peatlands in Dalyellup.

Linda Metz

So obviously fire is a threat and development is also a threat. Factors depending on where you are, so certainly in some cases Urban Development is a potential impact. Also fire particularly unregulated fire, is a concern. Because obviously, once these things, you know, as you said in your introduction, they can burn for a long time because they've got a lot of organic matter.

And it's this sort of slow burn. It's not like a raging wildfire that you see, they sort of smoulder away, but for a really long period of time. Then you've also got other threats, which are things like feral animals. Unfortunately, and weed Invasions. So we've got particularly in the South West a bit of an issue with feral pigs who do love to get into this organic matter as you can imagine. It's like this muddy hole and they can really get in there and dig it up and look for, you know, food resource. So yeah, they're quite damaging. Unfortunately.

And climate change is the biggest one for sure.

Jacqueline Lynch

When should we check back? When will you have some solid results from this study?

Linda Metz

This is a co-lead with UWA and ECU, they've been building a body of knowledge with other partners for quite a while. And now we're moving into completing some of the research and then moving into implementation and management. So we're probably going to see some results I'd say in the next sort of year or so, we'll have a good handle on things and then moving into trying to implement.



Some of those threat abatements with, hopefully the support of land holders, and local governments and, you know, others too. Yeah, try and protect this amazing community.

Jacqueline Lynch

All right, Linda, we'll chat to you in a year when we have some answers.

Linda Metz

Okay, fantastic. Look forward to it.

Jacqueline Lynch

Linda Metz is from South West NRM.

They're looking at these peatlands that are littered around the South West. Not much is known about them, but they hope if they learn a bit more, they can protect them from some of these things like fire, climate change, and the pigs getting into the peatlands.