



Darwin on the origin of the Charles reserve

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Science writer

HIS great-great-grandfather collected bugs, beetles, birds and other unknown species on his quest for the origin of species.

Proving that biology runs in the family, Chris Darwin last weekend began his own quest for weird, wonderful and previously unknown creatures.

“I’m the lucky winner of the sucking bug team,” he says of the species on his personal discovery list. “I’m not sure if there was huge demand.”

It’s all part of a bio-blitz, a survey of the plant and animal species at the Charles Darwin Reserve in Western Australia’s Avon Valley, owned by conservation group Bush Heritage.

The goal of the blitz — funded by BHP Billiton Iron Ore and supported by environmental re-

search group Earthwatch Australia — is to discover, map and name the moths, butterflies, lizards, frogs, snakes, spiders, plants and, of course, sucking bugs on the 68,000ha reserve.

The week-long survey is being conducted by five teams of volunteers under the supervision of scientists from the West Australian Museum, the Australian Museum, the University of NSW and the West Australian Department of Environment Conservation.

Earthwatch Australia executive director Richard Gilmore said that if the survey, the first Australian trial of the internationally designed bio-blitz concept, went well, more could be conducted on other private and publicly owned protected areas.

According to Carl Binning, BHP Billiton Iron Ore’s vice-president with responsibility for sustainability, the mining giant did not contribute between \$50,000 and \$100,000 to the project merely to polish its image. It makes good business sense.

“Sustainable development is about bringing together economic activity with social activity and good environmental manage. This project does all those things,” Mr Binning said.

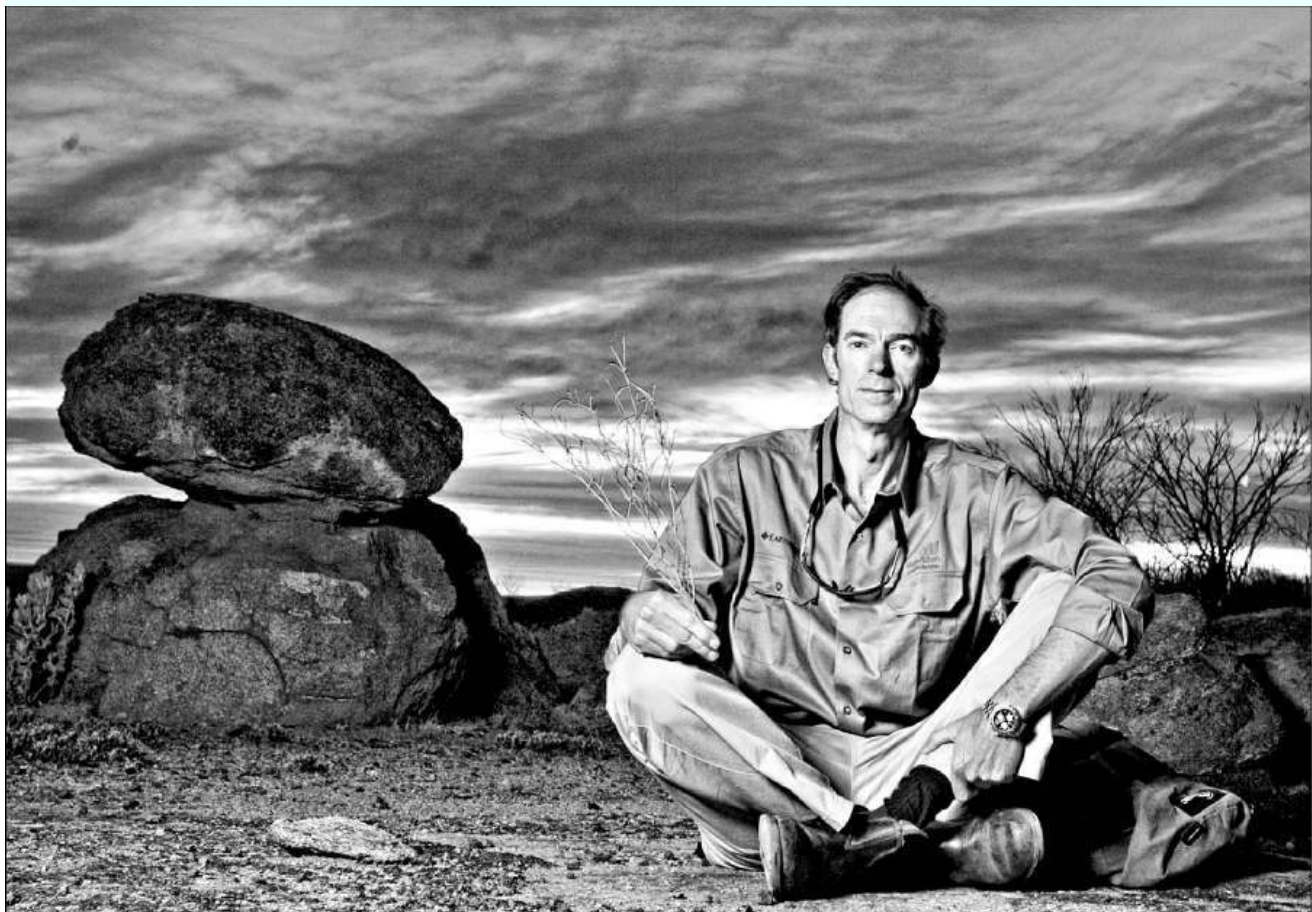
Until tomorrow, Mr Binning is surveying species at the reserve, which is part of a global biodiversity hot spot, one of only 25 such areas worldwide. Together, they hold about 50 per cent of all land-based species on Earth.

Tallying and studying Australia’s unique species is critical to

conserving them, Mr Darwin added. He contributed \$266,000 to Bush Heritage, which purchased the \$300,000 Whitewells station in 2003 to create the reserve. Since then, London-born Mr Darwin — now a guide in the NSW Blue Mountains — has joined other volunteers to reduce the population of feral plants and animals in the reserve.

Mr Darwin was inspired to make the donation by a comment his great-great grandfather made in his later years. “I... have often regretted that I have not done more direct good for my fellow creatures,” the author of *On the Origin of Species* said.

Mr Darwin said: “On receiving my inheritance, I knew this was my chance to address Charles’s only regret.”



All in the family: Chris Darwin, at the nature reserve in Western Australia named after his great-great-grandfather, Charles Darwin

Picture: Tony McDonough