

I wouldn't live anywhere else

"I wouldn't live anywhere else" - that's what Steven, Kate, and Luinna, three young Australians living in different parts of the country, all agree on. What does being a teenager in Australia mean for them?

Steven

I'm Steven and I want to tell you a bit about my life here in Western Australia. It's a way of life I really love. For 12 of my 17 years I've lived on my parents' sheep station in the outback. I have a younger brother, Malcolm. Even though we fight sometimes, I'm glad I have a brother because I don't meet other young people too often - twice a year at the local horse races. The nearest town, Meekatharra, is four hours away by car. So we only go in to do business once a month. Malcolm is 12 and will soon go to boarding school in Perth, like I did. I liked the school, but really missed the outback. So after I took my exams last year, I came back to work on the station with my mum and dad. I think our sheep station would seem really huge for Europeans. It takes five days to drive around it. Because of these long distances we use a plane to go looking for our sheep when it's shearing time. When my dad was a boy he used a horse for rounding up the sheep, but today we use motor bikes. Shearing takes place once a year. There's so much work to do that we hire extra men to help out. Like I said, we're a long way from everywhere. When somebody is really ill we have to call the "flying doctor". He or she then comes in by plane from one of the nearest towns.

It's pretty hot in the outback. Temperatures during the day are often in the high 30's, sometimes even in the 40's. We often sleep outside because it's cooler. It's great: we put our beds under the trees and hang mosquito nets over them. There are lots of scorpions around, so we put the bed legs into bowls of water to stop the scorpions crawling up in our beds. We have big sticks inside the house, ready to kill any scorpion or snake that comes in. Every few weeks the kangaroo shooters come out from town and kill as many kangaroos as possible.

Kangaroo meat is mostly used for pet food, although I know some people who eat it, too. I find it a bit too oily myself. I don't like kangaroos much - they destroy our fences. We also have another "enemy" - the dingo, a kind of wild dog. On a really bad night they can kill up to 20 sheep. Then we get the "doggers" to come. They are men who go out and kill the dingoes.

Before I went to boarding school I "went to" the School of the Air. Every day I listened to a half-hour lesson from a teacher on the two-way radio. Then I learnt with the help of a governess for the rest of the day. I had classmates with names and voices, but no faces. We talked to each other by radio just like in a normal classroom, even though we were really hundreds of miles away from each other. Soon the School of the Air may all be done by satellite, using computers and video.

I love this life. City people would probably find it a bit lonely. But I grew up here and this is where I'm going to stay.

Kate

I'm 17 years old and I'm in my final year of high school in Melbourne. I'm really looking forward to university. Later I want to become a marine biologist and work on the Great Barrier Reef. I should finish university when I'm 22. My six years at high school have been great. The thing I've enjoyed most has been the Outdoor Activities Programme.

Several times a year a group of teachers take us on bush-walks in the hills. It's really hard work though. Often there are no proper tracks, so we have to "bush bash" (that means beating the trees and plants back with our hands and arms to clear the way). There's lots of open bush here

Melbourne. You can make a camp among the gum trees miles from anywhere. Sitting next to a camp fire in the evenings is wonderful after a day of bush bashing.

I love the feeling of solitude. And nothing is nicer than roasting marshmallows on the fire, or baking chocolate-filled bananas in the coals. After a cold winter's bushwalk it's fantastic to get back home and warm up with a "floater". A floater is a hot meat pie in pea soup. Sleeping under the stars is great, although we always have tents in case it rains.

One time we got lost and it was a bit frightening. It was quite wet and most of us got "attacked" by leeches, which was horrible. Leeches look like little snails. They stick on your skin and suck your blood. This sounds pretty terrible, but leeches aren't poisonous. My friend Connie got a leech in her ear during the night and a boy got one on his eye! We always have to watch out for leeches, but that weekend was the worst.

In summer I spend nearly every weekend at our holiday house by the sea, just 1.5 hours from Melbourne. Lots of families have "weekenders" on the coast. That's where I learnt snorkeling and skin diving. I've just become a member of our local surf and lifesaving club.

When I haven't got too much homework, I go down to the beach at night with my friends. It's great just after the sun has gone down and it's still really warm. We have a barbecue and if someone has brought a cassette-recorder we dance for hours. I like it more than the discos in the city.

Luinna

My name is Luinna, which in English means "blue wren". I'm 16 years old. I'm a member of the Larrakia tribe. My people have lived for thousands and thousands of years on the north coast of Australia. The capital city of the Northern Territory, Darwin, was built on our land. When the white man came, we were forced to live on a reserve. My grandmother often teaches us the history of our people. She says it was a terrible time.

My ancestors were told by the white men to forget their culture. They were also not allowed to have religious ceremonies. Aborigines had to become Christians and had to dress and live in the white man's way. But our spirit is strong, and we have succeeded in keeping our culture. Now my tribe has moved back to our land near the beach in a Darwin suburb. I like it here.

We went back to look after the land and protect the sacred sites. There are both women's and men's sacred sites. In my tribe the women's sacred site is a spring where all the women are initiated. A water snake lives inside and the women protect the water by putting rocks around the edges. No man is allowed to touch these rocks. By drinking the water and sleeping next to the rocks, it is said that a woman can become pregnant. The men's sacred place is in the river swamps. I know that what I have just told you sounds strange to Europeans, but it's the way we live and what we believe in.

I leave the camp every day to go to a Catholic school in Darwin. My people want me to learn to speak the white man's way. They hope I can help to develop a better understanding between black and white people. But most of the other children in the camp don't go to school. They don't see why they should when unemployment among Aborigines is already so high. They know that blacks have a hard time at school and that the white kids laugh at us. I sometimes find it hard, too, especially when we only learn about European history and Jesus Christ. These things don't have anything to do with me.

I love this white boy, Paul. We see each other after school, and he sometimes comes to the camp and we go fishing. But Paul doesn't take me home to meet his parents. I think he's a bit ashamed of me.

If you asked me about my dreams for the future, I'd say that the well-being of my people and our culture is the most important thing of all.