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"Kids are fascinated with the sand drawings and they love to get hands-on."

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DAY FOUR

DESERT DWELLERS

TOMORROW
ULURU DAWN



GROWTH INDUSTRY



Taste sensation: A selection of typical bush foods that the world can't get enough of.

BOOM TIME FOR BUSH FOOD

Bush foods are flavour of the month: once considered a niche market, they're now worth an estimated \$10-\$16 million such are the demands from overseas and domestic markets. The challenge now is for Aboriginal people - who have been harvesting these foods for at least 40,000 years - to set up commercial operations which can reliably meet demand. Jenny Cleary leads the Bush Food

Project, run by the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre.

"We're concentrating on the bush tomato, which accounts for about half of the estimated value demand," Cleary says. "It's a true tomato, but it's yellow when ripe and is about the size of a marble. The flavour is very strong - some people say it has a caramel taste - and it goes extremely well with red and white meats."

Cleary says this traditional staple is becoming mainstream and is now found on shelves in Coles and Woolworths.

"But so far there are not many Aboriginal commercial ventures operating successfully in the area. Our research aims to find out how to help them to better participate - to develop commercial operations that reliably supply products through both horticulture operations and the traditional harvesting of wild fruits."

The bush foods industry, however, has its own peculiar challenges. "Deserts are unpredictable places, where you can have a flood of produce one season, then little or nothing for

years. Also fruits like the bush tomato come in enormous variety, while many markets demand consistency of size, colour and volume of produce."

The DKCRC is working with a number of third parties at all levels of the value chain. One such party is the Alice Springs Desert Park.

"We've started by trying to learn more about the plant by bringing Aboriginal people together with western science," says Cleary. "So the Desert Park, for instance, has assisted with research trials and mapping where the plant grows in the wild. We're looking at things like how much water it needs, what pollinates it and what soil conditions are best."

The knowledge is being used by Aboriginal operators who want to commercially farm the crop, as well as operators who want to hand-harvest wild fruits. "Gradually I believe we'll have two supply streams - the commercial horticultural harvesting of bush produce on a regular basis in areas where water supplies are reliable, and the low-volume wild harvesting of high-value produce sought by very discerning consumers."

Cleary believes demand for bush foods will only get bigger. "I think as a people we increasingly want to claim those things that are uniquely Australian."

See www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au/research/bushproducts.html

KIDS GRAVE A TRUE ART EXPERIENCE

ARTISTS SHARE SKILLS

Sitting with indigenous people in the Red Centre and learning to dot paint ranks second on a list of kids' dream travel experiences, a survey has found. Wendy Buckley, founder of TravelWithKidz, says feedback from her young clients enabled her to compile a top-10 list of activities.

Cambodia's Angkor Wat temple came in at No. 1, followed by the Red Centre experience.

Anangu Tours operating out of Yulara at Uluru invites groups to sit with Anangu

artists at the Uluru Cultural Centre for a fun introduction to Aboriginal art, as well as the chance to try dot painting.

The senior interpreter for Anangu Tours says children really throw themselves into the experience.

"The kids are fascinated with the sand drawings we do to show them the symbols used in traditional Aboriginal art," the interpreter says.

"And they love the fact they can get hands-on and create their own masterpiece to take home."

"I've seen some unique creations!" See www.ananguwaa.com.au



Unique lesson: Local women teach young tourists how to weave.



Secretive chap: The rough knob-tailed gecko is Australia's heaviest gecko - and one of the hardest to see in the wild.

KEEP YOUR EYES PEELED

Harsh environments, big country and extreme climatic conditions have produced species that are resourceful and resilient. But some are especially hard to find in the wild. Here are the desert dwellers most prized by naturalists and worth keeping an eye out for ...

ROUGH knob-tailed gecko: a born-and-bred Centralian found only in the MacDonnell Ranges. Also has the distinction of being Australia's heaviest gecko.

THE daisy bush: not seen in the Territory since 1873 when Ernest Giles reached Kata Tjuta; rediscovered in 2007 by Desert Park botanists working in the Petermann Ranges.

MALA or rufous hare-wallaby: no longer to be found in the wild but breeding programs conducted by the Alice Springs Desert Park in predator-proof paddocks have helped save the species from extinction.

GREY honeyeater: a favourite with twitchers all over the country, this threatened species is mobile and unobtrusive. Little is known of its habits, though a mating pair has recently nested in the Desert Park.

SUPERB katydid: an exotic-looking member of the grasshopper family with a curious crest behind the head - the function of which is unknown to science.

THE greater bilby: much-loved (iconic even), but little seen. This cat-sized marsupial is nocturnal.

CHIMING wedgetail: a real desert character, but an elusive one, found in the mulga around Uluru and Kings Canyon. The call is loud, surreal and sounding much like it's asking, "Did you get drunk?"

MARSUPIAL mole: a burrowing sand dweller that rarely ventures onto the surface and whose young are nurtured in a pouch. Very little is known about this animal.

Want to narrow the odds of a sighting? Most of these species - including hundreds of other plants and animals found across Central Australian deserts - are on display in the Alice Springs Desert Park.

See www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au

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'Ahaakeye Bush Plum Dreaming' by Lindsay Bird Mpeyane. MIBANTUA GALLERY

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*For full competition terms and conditions visit travelnt.com

ON YOUR BIKES

DESERT RACE IS ON AGAIN

You might call James Williamson a "hard case". Last July, he became a Solo Mountain Bike World Champion after racing continuously for 24 hours.

Two months earlier, he entered a competition closer to home - the Anaconda MTB Enduro in Alice Springs.

"And I'm doing it again in 2009," he says. "It's the one race in '09 I definitely want to do."

Like most of the 200 mountain bikers in 2008, Williamson was wrong-footed

by the Alice Springs event, thinking he was about to race over flat desert.

"It was a real surprise. Blue skies, beautiful crisp mornings and riding over the MacDonnell Ranges ... it's scenery you don't see anywhere else.

"And there are so many interesting trails around Alice Springs. You've got flowing open trails, but others that mix it up with traverses, turns and rocks."

The Anaconda MTB Enduro is a stage race requiring competitors to complete seven challenges over five days.

"The stages are really varied. One day

you'll do a timed hill climb that takes around a minute. The next day you're doing a 100-kilometre race."

Williamson - who edits mountain bike magazine *Enduro* out of Melbourne - says stage races are growing in popularity across the world.

"Mountain biking at the recreational level is being seen as the 'new golf' in countries like the US. And unlike road racing competitions, which tend to be pretty serious, events like this are open to cruiser mountain bike riders who want a bit of competitive action."

The 2009 Anaconda MTB Enduro takes place in Alice Springs from May 25-29.

See www.rapidascent.com.au/AnacondaMTBEnduro



Out there: The scenery from a bike is something special.



"It might not be what you are used to at home. That's all the more reason to come."

Jim Cotterill, Modern Day Pioneer, 10.05am

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