

# Conservation work features heavily at luxury resort

**E**MIRATES Hotels & Resorts started work on a habitat regeneration project at its first luxury Australian conservation resort, Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa earlier this year. TONY WILLIAMS, senior vice president of the hotel group, spoke to CHERYL MANDY about its fierce commitment to protect this 4,000 acre ecologically sensitive site previously a cattle farm.

**How is work progressing?**

All is going very well, but in the planning stages we took a lot of care to ensure that the services we will be able to offer will make Wolgan Australia's most luxurious resort. We started off removing invasive noxious plants, weeds and non indigenous flora, then planted more than 1,000 indigenous trees. The next phase of the conservation programme will focus on the removal of feral animals. This remains today the greatest threat to Australian wildlife, and their removal will ultimately lead to the creation of a wildlife corridor connecting three national parks.

**How have Australians reacted to your project?**

The result you get from your conservation work is massively proportional to the effort that you put in. Australia has a shocking record – it is the continent with the highest number of species extinct in the last 100 years, and that happened due to loss of habitat and feral invasion. Wolgan Valley along the Great Australian Divide has conservation significance for



Australia, and our proposal is to prevent reinvasion into this area. The Australians are very happy for us to be there.

Al Maha Desert Resort & Spa here in Dubai is the model which we set up and are taking to other places, that is, a concept of sustainable development binding together with hard core conservation work. Because it was a new concept in Australia it

was quite difficult to get all the parties – conservationists and luxury hotel operators - to understand what the dynamics required. When the tourism authorities went to Al Maha they realised how the concept worked.

**Didn't the Australians want to develop this area themselves?**

I'm sure they did. However, the Australian national parks are trying to manage concerns and issues over millions of acres. We look at a small piece of land and make it absolutely sacrosanct in terms of management. They couldn't focus on this 4,000 acres of land with the intensity that we do.

**Why is the business concept of this organisation so important to you?**

Too many conservation trusts, wildlife charities, NGO's, etc rely on commercial funding for their conservation work and when times are hard, like now, everyone's charity goes out of the window. I have been involved in projects in Africa that have had 15 years of intense conservation work stopped because they no longer have the money. The best managed conservation areas in South Africa are the private reserves as they have the money to really focus on hard core conservation and animal protection which a national park is not always able to do. I'm an ecologist by profession. I saw great projects just come and then go because there didn't have commercial backing, and a simple fact is that the conservation gain is enormous if it is done properly.

**Tell us about the resort's focus.**

We want the guests' experience here to be totally Australian orientated. The focus is on hiking, four wheel drive trips, bush experiences, horse riding. We don't want to ram conservation down their throats – what we want to do is provide them with a personalised experience combining nature, wildlife, service, luxury and history. And we had Australian designers working on the interiors, based around an original settler house – this is to ensure a sense of place is preserved.

**Are you expecting many people from the Middle East to go here?**

I don't expect we will phenomenally change the market mix of this region. Australia receives visitors mostly from the USA, Europe, Japan and Australians themselves. At Wogan we are allowing children but do not recommend it for those under eight in terms of parents' enjoyment.

**Do you have any other projects in the pipeline?**

Yes we are finalising a project in the Seychelles, which we also displayed at World Travel Market.

[The Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa is due to open in late 2009.]



**Join us for lots of fun at the Sharjah - Etisalat Water Festival**  
 Khalid Lagoon, Sharjah - December 2<sup>nd</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> daily from 4pm.

Come and enjoy lots of events, from Aquafantasia to the Stars of Florida Water Ski Formation Team. There's also a party zone, enchanting children's show, stilt walkers, puppet shows, a dance of the light flame, hot air ballooning and the grand finale, the F1 Power Boat World Championship.

For show information call 800 SHJ(745) or visit [www.swf.ae](http://www.swf.ae)

**Title Sponsor:** Etisalat, Sharjah Water Festival, Sharjah

**Main Sponsors:** SNASCO, QASBA, ADNOC, ENSHAA, Golden Tulip

**Co-sponsors:** DANAGAS, ENSHAA, Golden Tulip

**Partners:** MILLENNIUM HOTEL, Golden Tulip, AL ZAHRA, Golden Tulip