

Green action = economic, social wins



Small individual efforts can lead to amazing outcomes for the planet.

"Sometimes the immense problems with the environment can seem insurmountable, particularly on World Environment Day when we might reflect on the big picture issues," says Danielle Smalley, chief executive of Exchange for Change, the organisation charged with administering the NSW government's Return and Earn beverage container deposit scheme.

"However, Return and Earn, where individuals have collectively returned over 7.4 billion containers, serves as an extraordinary example of how individual action can have a collective impact."

The state's Return and Earn scheme is entirely funded by the beverage industry, and aims to place responsibility for container recycling firmly back

with the industry.

The scheme targets commonly littered drink containers, and includes most 150-millilitre to three-litre plastics, glass, aluminium, steel and liquid paperboard containers. Intact containers can be redeemed for 10 cents each via a network of 620 return points across NSW.

Smalley says the scheme is a perfect fit for this year's World Environment Day theme of "One Earth".

"We all need to take responsibility for the future of our planet. People using the scheme have taken accountability for collecting those containers and making the choice to not add to litter or just throw drink containers in the bin," she says.

Three out of four people in NSW have participated in the scheme, and the resulting positive environmental outcomes from these returns can be measured through the webbased Return and Earn "Impact Calculator", based on an independent life cycle assessment.

"The calculator models environmental effects, so people can see and trust that their individual actions bring water, energy, landfill and CO₂ emission savings," says Smalley.

While the environmental benefits of the scheme have exceeded expectations – reducing drink container litter volume by 52 per cent and sending more than 672,000 tonnes of packaging material to be recycled – there are also other ongoing benefits.



"One thing that has really excited me is that we are seeing social benefits from the scheme as well as the

Alexis Bowen, right, launched The Bin Chicken in 2020, to collect containers from local homes, sporting clubs and day care centres to reduce the volume of material going to landfill.

environmental benefits," says Smalley.

Since the scheme started in December 2017, more than \$30 million has been returned to charities and community groups via donations and fees.

"As the community partner of the 2022 NSW Environmental Citizen of the Year Awards announced annually on World Environment Day, Return and Earn shares the nominees' passion for effecting a positive change towards sustainability," says Smalley.

The award is part of the NSW Australia Day Council's annual NSW Local Citizen of the Year award program, in which local councils nominate those leading environmental initiatives in their communities.

This year's nominees include a range of diverse projects and approaches but who all share a passion for helping their local environment.

Port Macquarie-Hastings Council nominated Sue Baker, who formed the Dunbogan Bushcare volunteer group in 1999 to restore large tracts of highly degraded habitat. The group has

planted 6000 trees, constructed access pathways, eradicated invasive weeds, and introduced erosion control and a koala tree corridor.

The group worked with the National Parks and Wildlife Service to trial aerial spraying on inaccessible areas of Crowdy Head National Park, which eliminated 90 per cent of the prolific bitou bush weed across hundreds of hectares, restoring endangered habitats.

Baker now writes a weekly newspaper column, and has written three environmentally themed children's books.

Correctional officer Sanjeev Kumar, a horticulture overseer at Sydney's Parklea Correctional Centre, was nominated by Blacktown City Council for his many environmental initiatives across the prison.

His chemical-free vegetable gardens supply the prison kitchen, and around two tonnes of salad and vegetables are donated to the charity Food Bank.

Kumar's sustainability program teaches inmates useful gardening and recycling skills, and highlights the importance of green spaces for health, wellbeing and sustainability.

Campbelltown City Council nominee Alexis Bowen created The Bin Chicken in 2020, a local business collecting containers from local residences, sporting clubs and day care centres each month, reducing the volume of material going to landfill.

Bowen was inspired when walking with her family in the evening in a heavily littered local park; within five weeks, they had gathered more than 5000 discarded single use drink containers.

The Bin Chicken is a community-based, free recycling collection business returning a portion of the refund to the sporting clubs and day cares, while reinvesting in the local community with a free Community Pantry and Recycling Hub.

"Like our Environmental Citizen Award nominees and every individual or group participating in Return and Earn, all our individual actions collectively can make a difference," said Smalley.

returnandearn.org.au/impact-calculator