



It's only natural

PROFESSOR KINGSLEY DIXON DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND AGRICULTURE, CURTIN UNIVERSITY

"I WAS born hardwired to love plants and be in the bush. My parents and grandparents were avid gardeners and loved nature, and I spent my childhood absorbing that. I was always up trees, under shrubs, in swamps, forever getting into trouble because I was wet and muddy! I think all kids have an interest in the natural environment, but it has to be nurtured and developed. I think it is one of our great challenges now to reconnect kids with nature and the bush. We've become intensively urbanised and that passion is getting lost.

The dormant firebug in me was fascinated by bushfires, and seeing the bush burst forth from the ash in all those sensational greens as it regenerated afterwards. Little did I know that it would become a defining part of my research! Discovering smoke as the component of bushfires that triggers plant germination in Australian plants, and then pinpointing the specific chemical responsible, they were epic discovery points in my career. It is such a rare opportunity to make a discovery like that.

I was very fortunate to develop my career in the laboratories at Kings Park and Botanic Garden. I was surrounded by the most wonderful colleagues, and particularly the postgraduate students. It was a great honour that they chose to work with me, and so many times they've been my arms, my legs and my eyes in the lab and in the field. I didn't have a heavy teaching load as is often the case in the universities, and most importantly,

2016 WA Premier's Scientist of the Year Kingsley Dixon discusses his love of the bush and all things botanical, why research freedom is so important, and a career built on smoke.

I worked under a series of directors who gave me the freedom to think and explore without constraint, who told me to 'go for it', and build something. That was the greatest gift, and a very rare freedom in science.

I really think that great science happens when people are given the freedom to pursue their passion, and opportunities for long-term big thinking are supported and celebrated.

Here at Curtin, I'm fortunate to hold a research-only position, and can keep exploring nature through science, and keep asking the big questions. I love my orchid research – orchids are at the frontier of plant evolution,

they're the most evolved, the most diverse of all the plant families. There is still so much to discover about their pollination and nutrition – they're terrific research subjects. And the south-west of Western Australia is the richest place for ground orchids on the planet. Then there's also new flora being discovered around rock pools in the Kimberley, ecological restoration challenges to make mining more environmentally responsible in Western Australia, species in the Great Sandy Desert to document ... why would you go anywhere else?" 