



**\*\*STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL 5AM, 1 NOVEMBER 2019\*\***

## **2019 AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY AWARDS**

*THE BEST IN ADVENTURE AND CONSERVATION*

On Friday 1 November, the Australian Geographic Society will host its annual awards ceremony at the Grand Ballroom, Shangri-La Hotel, Sydney. The prestigious event will acknowledge this year's most remarkable Australians in the fields of adventure and conservation.

Respected journalist and broadcaster Ray Martin will return as Master of Ceremonies, with special guest speaker, Victor L. Vescovo, the renowned undersea explorer.

A retired American naval officer, Vescovo has just broken the record for the world's deepest ever dive which took him to the depths of the Mariana Trench (10,927m) in the Pacific Ocean. He was also the first person to reach the deepest point of the Atlantic Ocean in an historic solo submersible dive. These dives are part of Victor's Five Deeps Expedition, the world's first manned expedition to the deepest point in each of the five oceans – he has now been to the bottom of four of the world's oceans.

The Australian Geographic Society Awards are Australia's longest running awards for adventure and conservation and its winners are exceptional people who serve as inspirational role models to all Australians. The Lifetime Achievement Awards for adventure and conservation are the Society's highest honours, recognising those Australians who not only have a lifelong commitment to their chosen field but who have given back to the nation and inspired countless other Australians.

The ceremony brings together past winners, adventurers, scientists, conservationists and Australian Geographic Society enthusiasts to celebrate the passion, drive, courage (and sometimes resilience) of all the winners. Those in attendance include the founder of the AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC journal and patron of the Australian Geographic Society, Dick Smith AC.

**Please see over page for list of winners and their bios.**

**The Australian Geographic Society Awards are being presented on the evening of Friday, 1 November 2019 at Shangri-La Hotel Grand Ballroom, 176 Cumberland St, Sydney NSW 2000, from 6pm**

**For media enquiries, interviews, pictures and footage, contact:**

Lyn Tuit (Momentum<sup>2</sup>) (T) 02 9212 2000 (M) 0405 160 275/ [ltuit@momentum2.com.au](mailto:ltuit@momentum2.com.au)

## 2019 Australian Geographic Award winners

### ➤ Lifetime of Adventure, **MAL LEYLAND**



Along with his late brother Mike, Mal Leyland is an icon of Australian TV. During the 1970's the pair became famous through a series of televised adventures such as the high risk *Open Boat to Adventure*, in which they sailed a small dinghy through some treacherous seas from Darwin to Sydney, *Off the Beaten Track* and the hugely popular weekly series *Ask the Leyland Brothers* which launched in 1976 and drew a weekly audience of 2.5 million people. In each episode, the two brothers, along with their wives and children in their signature kombi vans, explored locations suggested by viewers, with the whole exercise filmed and edited in the style of home video.

The Leyland brothers were responsible for inspiring a generation of Australians to get out and explore their own country and became national icons. Everywhere they travelled, punters were excited to be part of the Leyland adventure. Comedian Norman Gunston described them as “the Starsky and Hutch of the dead centre”.

Friend and fellow adventurer Dick Smith was inspired by their spirit of adventure: “They did it all so inexpensively, spreading the message that anyone could do it,” he says. “They respected the landscape, were hard-working and earned their successes.”

Today, Mal is travelling alone – his beloved wife Laraine died in 2018. After almost 50 years of marriage, so much of it spent coated in dust on unsealed roads, Mal misses her terribly. He now travels in the relative luxury of a motorhome complete with solar panels, enough water to last him three weeks and a generator so he can edit his stories on the remotest of roads. At 75, he also hopes another Leyland series will be possible, fronted by him and daughter Carmen.

### ➤ Lifetime of Conservation Award, **JOHN RUMNEY**



John Rumney is a true pioneer of ecotourism on the Great Barrier Reef and one of the region's great characters.

His relationship with the reef began with commercial fishing, but after years spent diving and learning about this unique and fragile environment, he became increasingly aware of the negative effects of human activities. It led him to establish the adventure, scientific research and dive vessel *Undersea Explorer*. Each trip offered free berths to reef researchers facilitating vital access to remote places across the GBR. He also established Eye to Eye Marine encounters research and tourism operation which also facilitates primary reef research through tourism partnerships. His endeavours have supported hundreds of

researchers as well as raised the standards under which wildlife tourism and diving operates on the reef.

John has received many awards for his environmental leadership. He sits on countless boards and committees that have led to increased awareness and action to preserve the reef and is the Managing Director of Great Barrier Reef Legacy, a global leader in marine expeditions that accelerate actions vital to the future survival of coral reefs.

➤ **Conservationist of the Year, ALBERT WIGGAN**



A traditional owner and Bardi-Kija-Nyul Nyul man from the Dampier Peninsula of Western Australia, Albert Wiggan is passionate about culture, country and Indigenous science. The 38 year old is an Indigenous ranger with the Nyul Nyul ranger group and manages the delicate relationship between Western science and Indigenous teachings to preserve the sparkling waters of Boddergron (Cygnet Bay) and the ecologically rich lands across the peninsula and beyond it.

When the government tried to build the world's largest LNG gas export terminal at James Price Point (a vital marine sanctuary, home to Songlines and dinosaur footprints), Albert lobbied the Supreme Court and fronted a blockade until the developer withdrew from the project. He is also Deputy Chair of the Kimberley Indigenous Saltwater Science project, Indigenous Chair for Bilbies Australia's

National Recovery Team, and is the Nyul Nyul representative on the board of the Kimberley Land Council.

A graduate of the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Albert has toured internationally as a speaker and musician (accompanying Australian musician John Butler). He has also appeared in a number of film and TV projects including *Undermined*, a documentary investigating economic interests on Indigenous-held lands throughout the Kimberley region (which he co-produced) and the natural history series *Outback* broadcast on PBS in 2018. He has also delivered a TedXTalk promoting the need to recognise Indigenous ecological knowledge as science. He lives with his wife and three children on Nyul Nyul country in the Beagle Bay community of WA.

➤ **Adventurer of the Year, MICHELLE LEE**



Michelle Lee embodies the mantra she follows: "Start thinking you can, and you will!"

In February 2019, Michelle Lee became the first Australian woman to row solo across the Atlantic Ocean – a mammoth journey of 4700km. The 46 year old was competing in the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge, one of the world's toughest nautical races and the ultimate test in mental and physical strength and endurance. Michelle set off from

La Gomera in the Canary Islands and finished 68 days later, rowing into English Harbour in Antigua in the Caribbean. Throughout the trip she endured extreme conditions, including wild weather and swell, isolation, blisters upon blisters, sea sores and sickness, and sleep deprivation, and lost a whopping 14kg. She rowed from 5am until 10pm each day and at night slept in a small compartment in her boat.

"I had holes in my fingers from gripping the oars and massive callouses on my hands," Michelle says. "I had sores on my bottom as well from 12 hours in the seat. I had toothaches and ear aches, which I managed to fix with a bit of self-help — three courses of antibiotics. All of it made me realise how vulnerable I was. It was terribly confronting and frightening at times."

In completing the journey she also became the first Australian woman to row solo across any ocean. While challenging her personal limits was a primary goal, Michelle also set herself the task of raising money for The Sanctuary, a crisis centre in Sydney's north-west for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

➤ **Young Adventurer of the Year, JIMMY ASHBY**

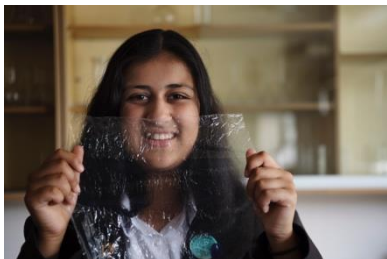


In April 2018, then 18-year-old Jimmy Ashby began the trip of a lifetime: a cycling journey around the world, from west-east, over 393 days, covering 39,100km across 32 countries and four continents. Jimmy says he had been preparing for the trip for years. At 16 he cycled 900km solo down the coast of Tasmania, and straight after finishing Year 12, he spent three weeks riding solo on the South Island of New Zealand.

Jimmy faced countless challenges – mechanical problems, harsh weather conditions and even global terrorism. Six weeks before Jimmy cycled the road on the Afghan border, four cyclists were killed in an act of terror by Islamic State. When Jimmy arrived at the location and found a memorial for them, it instantly broke him: the fear it could have been him, but also the fear that he was putting his friends and family through. According to Jimmy the most valuable thing he learned during his trip was to be more humble. His “go, go, go” attitude was replaced with a slower, more reflective one following a conversation with a fellow biker who made Jimmy question his own motivations. “I made the simple switch from telling people ‘I’m cycling around the world’ to ‘Just travelling through’ when asked. I learnt if they were actually interested in my story then they would want to chat.” Jimmy completed his journey in May 2019 following the last leg of his worldwide journey, Perth to Adelaide, but has his eyes set on more adventures.

After losing his grandmother to motor neurone disease, he dedicated his ride around the world to her, raising money to find a cure and also to assist those who are living with the disease today.

➤ **Young Conservationist of the Year, ANGELINA ARORA**



In 2018, Sydney high schooler Angelina Arora became known as the young scientist reshaping plastic waste thanks to her invention of a biodegradable alternative made from prawn shells.

“For a school science project, I made a plastic bag out of corn-starch, but it didn’t work because it was soluble in water, which would mean we’d have our groceries end up on the floor and it would also mean taking away precious food sources,” Angelina says. “That’s when I was at the fish and chip shop getting prawns for dinner and noticed that the prawn shells looked like plastic. I went back to the lab and thought about what exactly made them look like that.”

Angelina had discovered an element of the prawn shell that could be mixed with a protein from spider web to create a plastic that decomposed 1.5 million times faster than conventional plastics. For her invention she earned a BHP Science and Engineering Award and was touted as the “16-year-old changing the world” by National Geographic. But she didn’t stop there. Angelina is now exploring the effect of algae on oil spill remediation, which has again earned her a nomination in the BHP Science and Engineering Awards.

In April of this year, Angelina became one of the youngest people to give a TED talk. While many may think that Angelina would go into the field of material engineering, she actually has her eyes set on a medical degree. “Victor Chang is my ultimate role model,” she says. “He was fearless. I want to be a doctor in medical research.”

➤ Spirit of Adventure, **NICK GLEESON**



Blind since an accident at the age of seven, Nick is an extraordinary Australian. His passion for sport and adventure is inspiring and his record of achievement in these fields would be truly extraordinary even for a fully sighted person.

Melbourne-born Nick excelled at sport at his special boarding school for the blind and later at university. He became a marathon runner and has competed in the New York marathon three times. He has represented Australia in athletics in the UK and Hong Kong and at the Paralympics in the USA in 1984, and has represented Victoria in blind cricket. He describes himself as being happiest when running by himself. He describes it as “a wonderful sum of trust plus belief plus danger plus courage.”

In 2002, Nick received the AG Society’s Spirit of Adventure for his climb of Mt Kilimanjaro in Tanzania with his four-person expedition team Blind Ambition. After that achievement, he was adventuring in New Zealand when he had the chance to meet his inspiration and hero Sir Edmund Hillary at Hillary’s own home.

Nick has climbed to 6000 metres on Everest and has crossed the Simpson Desert on foot. In May 2019 he made a solo traverse of Island Lagoon, a dry salt lakebed in South Australia, which he undertook without the assistance of his constant companion, Unity, his dedicated Seeing Eye dog. Nick received encouragement and instructions from his support team via a UHF radio but, apart from that and a satphone, he was completely alone for two nights and three days and he carried and set up all his own camping gear. At one stage Nick sank up to his knees in wet sand as unexpected rains softened the otherwise dry lakebed.

Nick’s not just a sportsman and adventurer, he’s also a passionate advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, an in-demand motivational speaker and a gifted writer.