



Human Nature  
ADVENTURE THERAPY

# Recre8 Program

## EVALUATION

## Executive Summary

July 2019

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*Recre8 is a therapeutic early intervention program delivered by Human Nature Adventure Therapy for at-risk young people aged 14 to 19 living in Northern NSW. While a ten-day bush expedition is the central therapeutic tool used within Recre8, participants receive more than 200 hours of individual and group-based therapeutic mentoring over four months, and longer if needed. The journey is carefully constructed to balance active physical elements with relationship-building experiences and reflective processes. The building of a strong therapeutic alliance between the young people and trained mental health professionals during the expedition creates fertile ground for in-depth counselling beyond the program if needed.*

Research demonstrates that Australian Bush Adventure Therapy mobilises at least four key 'Mechanisms of change' for participants:

1. Adventure activities – use of physical adventure and challenge
2. Therapeutic frame – therapeutic intentions and approaches used by skilled practitioners
3. Small groups – use of prosocial groups and safe healthy relationships, and
4. Natural environments – contact with nature and time spent in remote bush environments.

Each of these four mechanisms is supported by a body of evidence. The tailored application of these combined mechanisms has been found to provide a dynamic and holistic experience, and an attractive form of therapeutic intervention for people of all ages.

Because of its multi-dimensional environment, Bush Adventure Therapy provides benefits across multiple areas of health and wellbeing.

A recent meta-analysis conducted by Bowen and Neill (2013) demonstrated that adventure therapy interventions are known to support short-term outcomes for participants in areas of emotional, behavioural and social (interpersonal) wellbeing, and that these outcomes appear to be maintained in the longer term.

This evaluation found that Human Nature's Recre8 service model and therapeutic practices are solid and effective. It is apparent that *how* Recre8 operates is well suited to what it wants to achieve.

The strength and responsiveness of the Recre8 model is evidenced in the integrity of its staff team, and the therapeutic benefits achieved with young people.

Recre8's physical adventure components engage young people's physical bodies in the therapy experience.

The psychological support and therapeutic conversations provided by Recre8's mental health practitioners supports the mental and emotional wellbeing of participants.

The use of small safe groups provides immediate social and behavioural feedback.

Time in nature provides a significant and memorable way to experience personal insights and connect with the wider world.

***Recre8's multi-dimensional 'environment of change' provides young people with an attractive and dynamic medium through which they can experience themselves in new ways.***



**In February 2018, Human Nature Adventure Therapy (Human Nature) engaged Adventure Works Australia (AWA) to undertake an evaluation of their Recre8 program.**

Based on agreed objectives and parameters, the evaluation design included three components:

1. Formative evaluation
2. Outcome evaluation, and
3. Process evaluation.

All three components involved a range of data sources and a mix of research methods, including: a desktop review of program literature, staff interviews and qualitative thematic analysis.

The outcome and process components involved surveys of current program participants, plus surveys of past program participants and their carers and referrers. Both outcome and process components involved qualitative analysis. The outcome component also involved quantitative data analysis.

The evaluation aimed to:

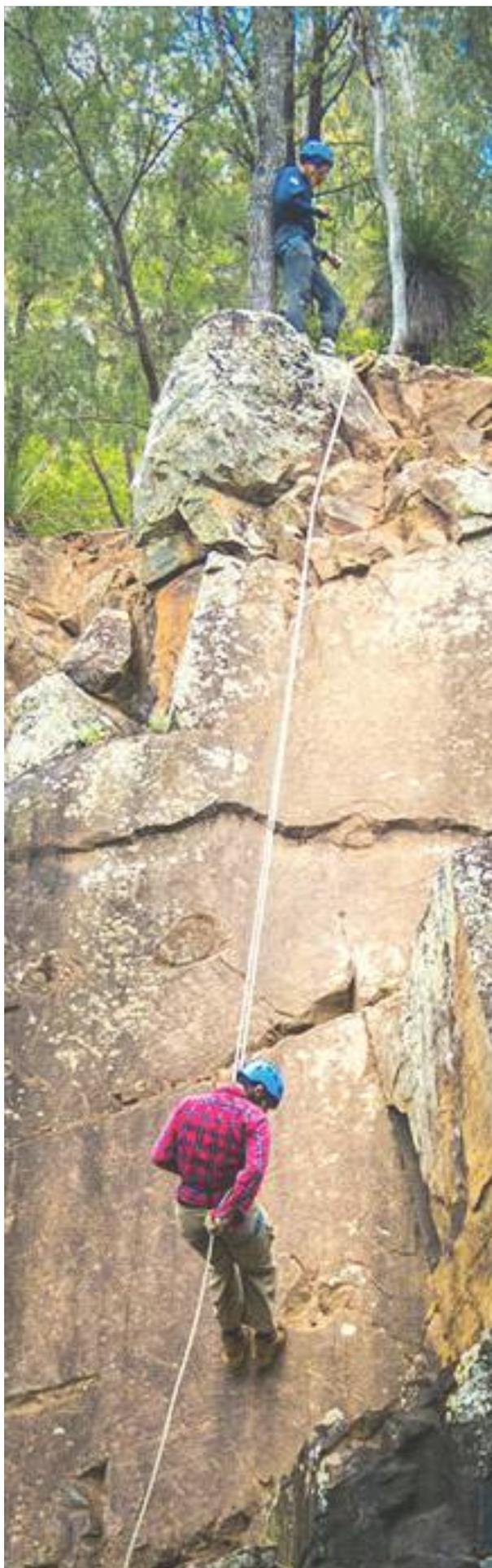
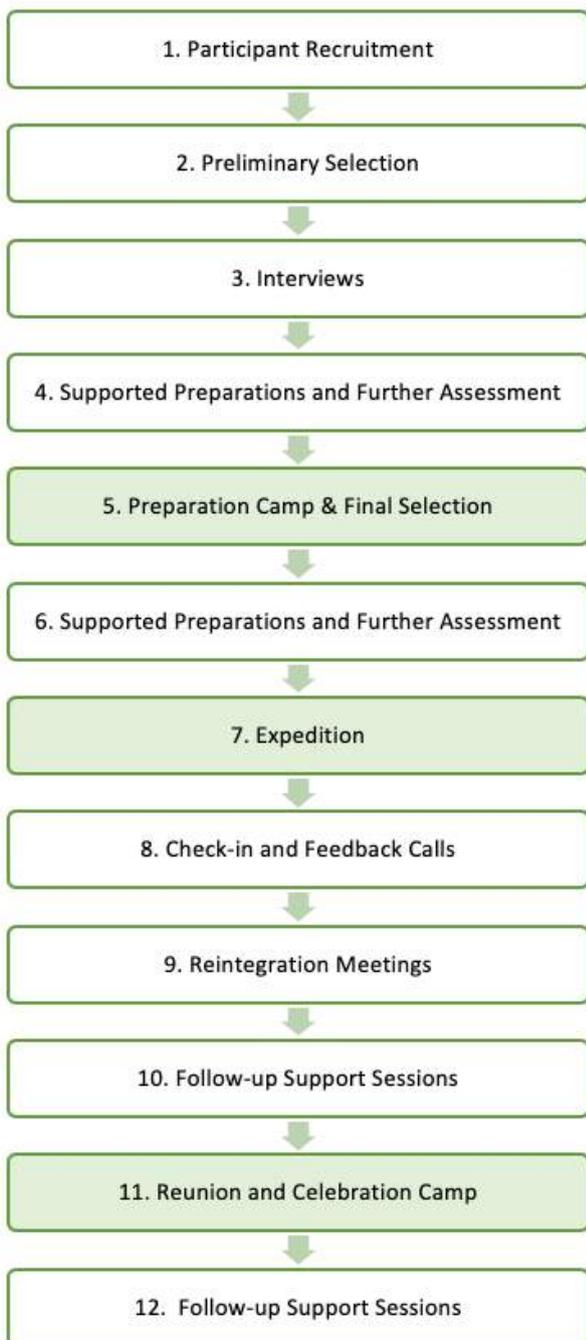
1. Determine whether and how well Recre8 achieves its intended impacts
2. Support Recre8 in articulating and documenting its program model and practices
3. Support the enhancement of Recre8's data collection and analysis processes, and
4. Determine if and how the Recre8 model or its delivery can be improved.

**The origins of Recre8 lie in the personal histories of two men, and their collaboration to create a worthwhile program. Graham Pringle and Andy Hamilton came from different professional backgrounds, yet these two men shared an understanding of the power of group-based adventures in natural bush environments, and a passion for improving the lives of disadvantaged 'at risk' young people.**

## Recre8's Therapeutic Pathway

Once recruited, Recre8 participants are involved in individualised processes leading up to two key features of the program - the group-based **Preparation Camp** and the **Expedition**.

After the intensity of the expedition, young people are supported to integrate changes made, and celebrate their achievements at a **Reunion and Celebration Camp**. Tailored long-term follow-up is provided as needed.





## Findings

**The Recre8 program model encompasses theoretical foundations that include bush adventure therapy, psychology, narrative approaches and counselling. Combined with extensive practice wisdom gleaned from outdoor education and outward bound approaches, Recre8 is based on solid practice foundations.**

Recre8 participants come with wide-ranging psychological needs. Over time, Recre8 staff have developed a unique way of mobilising Bush Adventure Therapy's four 'mechanisms of change' (MoC) to great effect with participants.

Of the four MoC, Recre8 staff emphasise a strong therapeutic frame and counselling conversations with a trusted adult. By providing qualified and experienced mental health counsellors, Recre8 offers a positive experience of counselling for young people.

Staff have observed that positive experiences of safe, responsible adults are highly valuable for their target group. This strategy is supported by the program's commitment to providing high adult-to-young person ratios for camps and the journey, and affirmed through participant feedback.

The tailored and therapeutic use of Bush Adventure Therapy MoC provides young people with the support they need, resulting in benefits across multiple areas of wellbeing.

### **Key characteristics of the Recre8 model that have remained the same over time:**

- Provide a human-propelled remote journey.
- Develop a strong therapeutic alliance between the participants and the therapists, who are trained psychologists and mental health professionals.
- Facilitate young people's internal motivation and impetus for making good decisions.
- Challenge young people out of their comfort zones, but not so far that they move into 'fight' or 'flight' mode.
- Rather than 'breaking young people in' by teaching participants to conform and follow orders, Recre8 uses a skills-based and non-disciplinarian approach, where staff gradually hand leadership of the expedition over to participants as they are ready.

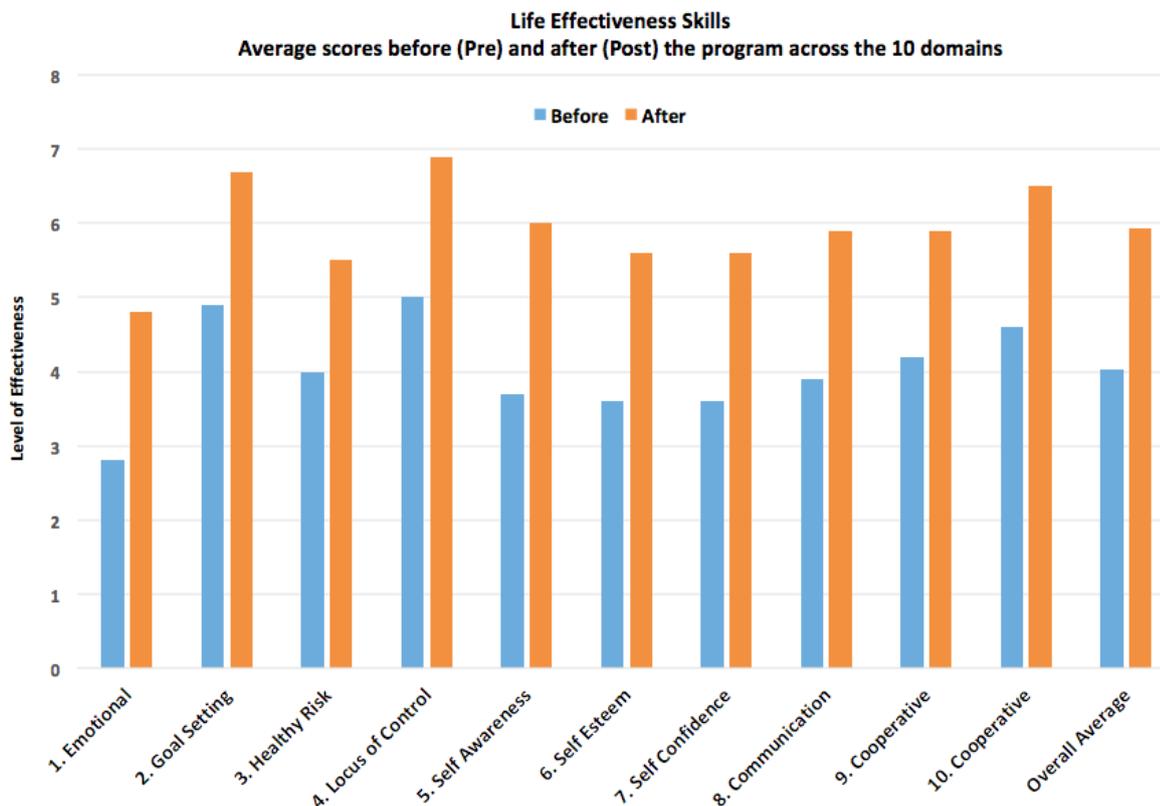
At the time of this report, Human Nature receives no Government funding. The continuation of the Recre8 program currently relies on contributions from individual donors, targeted corporate and foundation grants, supporting services, and small contributions from participants if able.

***Given its role in providing intensive therapeutic support to some of regional NSW's most disadvantaged young people at a vulnerable developmental age, Human Nature has a legitimate case to seek Government and ongoing philanthropic grants to secure its unique contribution to the Northern Rivers region.***

## Positive program outcomes

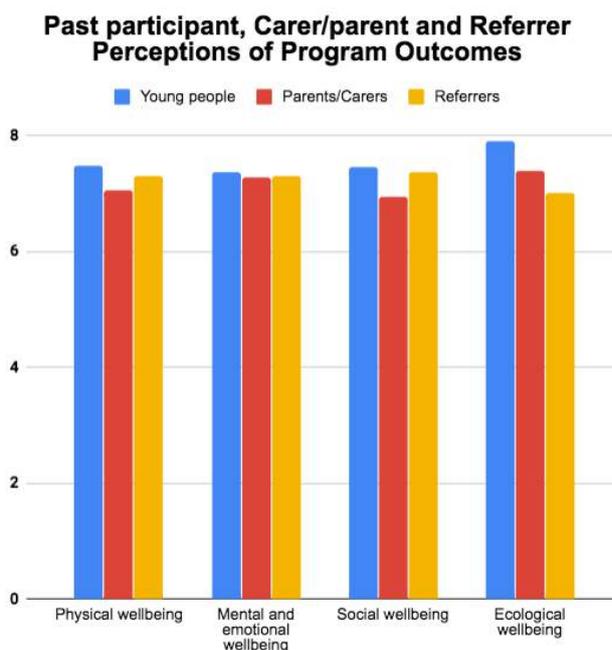
The evaluation found that all participants of two different Recre8 programs delivered in May and August 2018 (n=16) achieved similar outcomes. All showed increases across all ten domains of 'life effectiveness' identified through self report using the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire. This points to a level of quality and consistency found across Recre8 programs.

The life effectiveness skill of 'Self Awareness' showed the greatest increase from Pre to Post. One young woman self-reported that she perceived her increased self awareness to be a 'negative outcome' - she was now more aware of her emotions and no longer able to push them down, meaning she would have to learn to deal with the increased self awareness.



Triangulation of interview results with three past participants and their parent/carers and referrers identified that all stakeholders (n=9) believed Recre8 was highly beneficial for the young person.

All stakeholders also believed that some participant outcomes persisted for months and even years after the intervention, with potential for some changes to be maintained for life. Future studies could build understanding of these longer-term trends.



## Negative or neutral outcomes

The current evaluation found that across two different programs delivered in 2018, 'Healthy Risk Taking' showed the smallest increase (1.5 points) across all ten areas of life effectiveness. Given the importance of learning to manage personal risk-taking for this target group, this area could be given further consideration by Recre8 staff.

Having to deal with 'finishing the expedition' and 'going home' was mentioned by several young people as a negative experience associated with their Recre8 expedition. While Recre8 staff preempt and support this transition as much as they can, it is possible that Recre8 could enhance the effectiveness of their intervention by finding a way to simultaneously work with the young person's parents/carers while the young person is involved in the program and on expedition.

Due to low sample sizes all results are considered indicative, and able to be strengthened through further investigation.

## Effects with this target group

While Recre8 is designed to intervene before the onset of major health problems, staff prioritise those with highest need. As a result, staff support and manage some of the most severe psychological and social risks possible for this age group.

That staff are able to manage these issues, and the incidents and dynamics that go with them, is a credit to the commitment, skills and efforts of each staff member.

In practical terms, Recre8 provides an engaging and effective form of early mental health treatment for young people with complex needs.

Qualitative results demonstrate that Recre8 participants felt they benefited most in the area of psychological outcomes. They spoke of having more confidence, building inner strength, feeling happier, feeling 'lighter', more inspired, more independent, having a new outlook, and having new ways of dealing with things.

***"I just think the guys do a really wonderful job. I do this sort of stuff at school. I take my hats off to them that they do it all the time. The commitment, the passion, the time away from family; I think they're wonderful. Every staff member has a hard time, but they keep coming back and giving their all to the kids, I think they're a really a wonderful bunch of people"*** (Referrer of multiple participants to multiple programs)





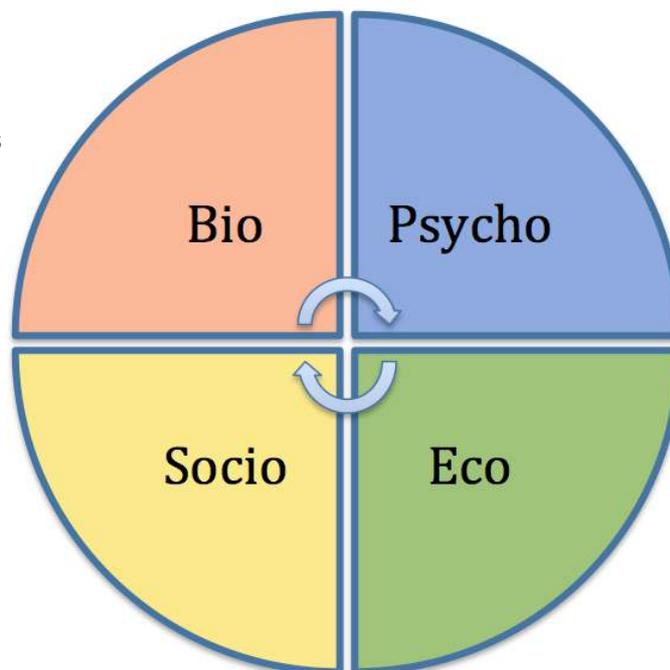
## Conclusions

***This evaluation found that Recre8 provides an intensive, integrative and tailored bush adventure therapy program to build young people's psychological and social wellbeing, with spin-off benefits for their physical wellbeing, their relationship with nature, and their relationships with family and community. While some BAT services would benefit from a strengthening of their theoretical and therapeutic conceptual frameworks, these areas are a strength of the Recre8 model.***

The Recre8 model is sound, ethical and supported by research evidence. While there is room for improvement and enhancement, the current program model achieves a great deal with each participant, and participant benefits gain a breadth of wellbeing outcomes.

The physical and experiential elements within Recre8's adventurous journeys and camps help to build young people's physical wellbeing.

The healthy relationships developed with staff, outdoor leaders and peers within Recre8 help to build young people's social wellbeing.



The therapeutic and counselling elements within Recre8's program model and approach help to build young people's psychological wellbeing.

The time participants spend in natural environments during Recre8's adventurous journeys and camps helps to build their ecological wellbeing.

The evaluation determined that Recre8 intends to achieve significant therapeutic change with each and every participant they support, and that the program does indeed consistently achieve significant therapeutic benefits in areas of psychological wellbeing and social skills.

While prior to the evaluation Recre8 already had strong promotional material and a draft program manual, the evaluation has provided greater theoretical detail and a practice framework for articulating the model and intended benefits.

Given the consistently high needs of young people referred to the program, and the apparent frequency of disclosures by young people to Recre8 staff of previous or current abuses, it is clear that Recre8 staff are operating at the highest levels of therapeutic care and responsibility.

This evaluation found that in addition to providing an effective early intervention for at-risk youth, Recre8 is also providing early mental health treatment and psychological care for young people experiencing early signs and symptoms of mental ill health - in some cases already diagnosed, and in other cases not yet diagnosed.

Given the timing and level of support provided by Recre8, it is likely the intervention helps to improve the long-term trajectories of many participants.

**Conclusions and recommendations are offered in light of the acknowledged high workloads of a small staff team. Human Nature's success in securing appropriate and adequate funding will be critical to the achievement of recommendations made.**

***“[Recre8] was really great. I loved it. It changed my life. A lot of kids should go. If they’ve got trouble, it will get them on the right track...”  
(Participant, 2017 program)***

## Foundations

- Over its ten-year history, Recre8 has been improved by the professionalism of staff, regular staff reviews, and diligent staff efforts.
- Program quality and integrity are achieved through a commitment by key staff to be reflective in their practice and value ongoing learning.

## Target group

- This evaluation found that Recre8 provides both 'early intervention' and 'early mental health treatment' for young people who have experienced childhood adversities such as neglect or abuse and who as a result are experiencing significant personal difficulties.
- Supporting this level of therapeutic need in group-based programs in remote locations warrants extra resources and a larger team of employed staff.

## Program model

- Over time, Recre8 has developed a unique approach in mobilising the four BAT 'Mechanisms of change' to great effect with participants.
- While the holistic and multi-dimensional experience of BAT helps to explain Recre8's effectiveness with at-risk young people, it is the provision of high quality individual- and group counselling that strengthens psychological outcomes for participants.

## Participant outcomes

- Recre8 supports positive impacts for participants across biological (physical), psychological (mental and emotional), social (relational) and ecological domains of wellbeing.
- Participants tend to gain significant improvements in mental and emotional wellbeing, and 'feel differently about themselves' due to participation in the program.

## Value for money

- The Recre8 program model currently provides around 200 hours of individual- and group-based counselling for each young person. Furthermore, it adds the known benefits of physical activity, healthy social relationships and contact with nature.
- In terms of investment made, Recre8 is highly cost-efficient, and would benefit from a larger investment to increase capacity and maximise program efficiencies.
- In terms of return on investment, Recre8 provides a highly effective therapeutic approach for high-risk young people.
- Because Recre8 specifically targets at-risk young people who are falling through service gaps and who would not otherwise be able to access or afford the benefits of an intervention like this, it is likely that Recre8 plays a significant role in steering at-risk young people away from costly downstream trajectories that may otherwise include substance abuse, unemployment, hospitalisation, even incarceration.
- In terms of providing mental health treatment for young people, Recre8 offers a modality that is both engaging and effective. As such, Recre8 has overcome two key challenges for youth mental health services worldwide.
- Given its provision of intensive therapeutic support to some of NSW's most disadvantaged young people at a vulnerable developmental age, Human Nature has an important role to play in the lives of young people and their families.
- This evaluation identified a high level of need for the Recre8 intervention model, and significant positive outcomes for participants.
- A key implication of this evaluation is that Human Nature has a legitimate case to seek and secure substantial ongoing Government and philanthropic funding.

*"[After the program] I had the option to do drugs and drink – but I haven't done it because of the things that people shared on the camp. I was able to say 'No thanks'" (Participant, 2017 program)*

*"It's a life-changing choice, to go with it. It gets a lot of weight off your back, improves you in so many ways. It's a good time out in nature, to connect to the land, be free. Most kids spend a lot of time inside" (Participant, 2017 program)*

## The evaluation provided recommendations to support the consistency and longevity of Recre8's important role with at-risk young people.

Recommendations focus on ways to enhance Human Nature's service model, ways to enhance the current program design and practices, ways to establish ongoing evaluation, and ways to sustain the program into the future. See full report for detailed recommendations made.

The findings of this report support Human Nature's goal to secure ongoing funding for this valuable youth program on the following premises:

1. It is widely understood that money spent on early intervention and youth mental health is money well spent.
2. Given the extensive body of BAT research, and the results of a recent meta-analysis in particular, it is unlikely that another therapeutic modality will be as engaging and effective with this particular cohort of young people.
3. Based on the evaluation team's observations of the Recre8 staff team, it is unlikely that another staff team could be more skilled and dedicated in their efforts to therapeutically support each young person recruited into the program.
4. Support for this program will likely result in significant cost reductions in relation to the future health needs of this particular cohort of young people, namely those who are socially and economically disadvantaged, and relatively geographically isolated.



**Evaluation Report prepared by Adventure Works Australia Ltd.**

AWA creates opportunities for people from all walks of life  
through Bush Adventure Therapy practice, research and practitioner training.

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