



ROBIN MCDONALD SCHOLARSHIP



2010 Scholarship Winner

The first recipient of the Robin McDonald Memorial Scholarship, **Jessica Elmes**, will undertake an Honours study through the University of Newcastle to test the effectiveness of fire in encouraging plant growth in areas affected by mining. Jessica grew up and completed high school in Taree before following in her mother's footsteps and beginning training to become a nurse in 2005. She completed a year of nursing studies at the University of Newcastle before deciding that nursing was not for

her. She went home to think about her future and in 2006 worked as a Landcare volunteer for Taree Council two days a week, weeding and planting.

"I really like doing things with my hands, I find it very relaxing," Jessica said. "I worked for Council during National Tree Day and was interested in the community aspects of their work, as well as the science side."

Jessica enrolled in a Bachelor of Environmental Science and Management and came back down to the University of Newcastle's School of Environmental and Life Sciences in 2007. It turned out to be a good decision, with Jessica enjoying her studies and achieving a distinction average to qualify for the Honours program. Her Honours study will examine the effectiveness of using fire to facilitate under-storey vegetation growth in mine rehabilitation. The project is one of a number being undertaken by the University's Centre for Sustainable Ecosystem Restoration and Jessica will experiment on plots adjacent to the Mt Owen coal mine near Muswellbrook, which is operated by Xstrata. Under supervisor Dr Carmen Castor, Jessica will compare the results of burning on a 20 by 20 metre plot converted from agricultural land with a nearby plot of remnant growth from Ravensworth State Forest, as well as a control plot. She is also experimenting with growing heat and smoke affected seed stock in the University's shade houses.

"The scholarship has given me the opportunity to focus on my studies without having to work to support myself," Jessica said. "It will really take the pressure off and I'm very grateful to the HRF for offering it."

Jessica will complete her Honours study in one year. While she is uncertain at this stage whether she will pursue a research career, she is interested in the work of the Foundation and welcomes further involvement with the organisation.