

Without a trace

Paul Norman's car was found 71kms north of Birdsville in November 1992. A message left in the vehicle said "broken down headed north".

Almost a year later some of his belongings were found at Poeppel's Corner, where the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australian borders meet, 200km south of the car.

Andrea Wharton left the Gold Coast in February 1984 to visit friends in Byron Bay. She contacted her family a couple of days later to say she would be staying longer but all subsequent attempts to locate her have been unsuccessful. These are just two of the mystifying cases that the Missing Person's Unit (MPU) is investigating.

When asked about missing persons most people can name Daniel Morcombe, the 13-year-old abducted on the Sunshine Coast

in 2003, but the reality is that more than 35,000 people across Australia are reported missing every year, 4,100 of these in Queensland alone. That is one every 15 minutes. The MPU is responsible for working through all these cases.

The MPU's Detective Sergeant Rebecca Oliver said alerting police as early as possible was crucial to the investigation.

"Not only does it offer the best chance of finding the missing person, it also limits the emotional impact on family and friends, and the likelihood that the missing person may become a victim of crime," Detective Sergeant Oliver said.

"Locating missing persons is done in a number of ways. We find the best way is a coordinated approach with support from the community. Sometimes missing

people turn up of their own accord, other times it is family, friends or the police who find them."

To maximise publicity the MPU has partnerships in place with Queensland's leading sporting teams including the Brisbane Broncos, Brisbane Lions, Gold Coast Titans, North Queensland Cowboys, Queensland Reds and the Queensland Roar. MPU staff also attend Queensland's major agricultural shows.

Police also work closely with the producers of the television program *Missing Persons Unit* which is screened on the Nine Network. Publicity initiatives like these are vital to finding missing persons.

Detective Sergeant Oliver said sharing information and getting the community involved helped both with preventing and solving missing persons cases.

"It is important to understand why people go missing. That's the best way of reducing the incidence of missing persons," Detective Sergeant Oliver said.

"We also try to empower families and friends to be involved in the search. Every effort has to be made in encouraging missing people to make contact themselves."

"For every missing person case reported to police an average of 12 people are affected. This can include impacts on physical and mental health, financial status and relationships," she said.

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Photos John Van Assen