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"I went to visit my uncle up in Arnhem Land during the holidays," said Jenny. "I wrote an essay about him for Mrs Solomon. We had a lot of fun going out bush with him. He sure knows a lot!"

"What sort of stuff?" asked Alex.

"Well, all about lizards, goannas especially – what they eat, where they go at what times, how many there are – all that and more," she answered.

"How come he knows all that stuff? Is he a biologist?" queried Phong.

"No," laughed Jenny. "Partly it's because he hunts lizards, so he needs to watch them pretty carefully. But a lot is cultural knowledge, he told me, that he learned from the elders."

"I've got an aunt who studies lizards," Wai Ling interjected. "She goes bush too, for weeks at a time, looking for crowned geckos, way out near Broken Hill. They're endangered, so she's trying to find out all about them."

"Funny you should say that," responded Jenny. "My uncle has done some work with a lizard scientist called Pete – we talked to Pete and he said that he learns a whole lot more from Uncle Markum than he could from months of field trips."

"Maybe Aunt Jishen should do that too – save herself a lot of work."

"But your uncle just wants to catch the goannas to eat, Jenny," Phong interjected. "Scientists want all the facts, not just a meal. Science is about pure knowledge. How can your uncle's knowledge help that lizard scientist?"

"If you want a goanna meal out there, you had better know a few facts," Jenny hotly asserted, "because it's pretty rough country. And if you want to even see one lizard, let alone study it, those facts will help."

"So he's a sort of scientist," pondered Alex. "Anyhow, I don't think that scientists are just interested in pure knowledge. Wai Ling's aunt is trying to save those geckos, not just learn about them."

"Yeah," added Wai Ling, "I reckon anyone who is curious about the world – whether they want to use that knowledge or not – is a scientist."

"Yeah, well, I'm still not sure," Phong said. "Knowing facts is part of science, for sure, but don't scientists want more? Like explanations?"

Jenny's essay

What I did in my holidays

During the holidays, I went to Arnhem Land to meet Uncle Markum, my father's brother. When Dad came south to get an education, Uncle Markum stayed. He told me he got an education too – not like Dad's, but just as tough. I can believe it: he sure knows a lot.

Here's an example. One day, we were driving along in his old Toyota ute when he shouted "Bungarra!" and pulled over. He ran to the edge of the long grass and peered at the ground. I was puzzled, but soon he came back with a goanna – that's what he meant by 'Bungarra'. He told me that he had to look for the fresh footprints, not in the sand, but among the stony gravel, because there he could get a more accurate indication of the goanna's speed, direction of travel and how long it had been since the goanna was there. He said that when the goanna moves the stones, you can see dampness or roughness underneath because these stones have been in the ground, rather than exposed to dust and wind.

He told me that we would have to prepare the goanna for eating later. He knew it was a female, but said that, as it is out of the breeding season, we could be sure there wouldn't be any eggs. I didn't help much, but later I watched him slit the goanna from neck to crutch underneath, and carefully open it up without disturbing the organs. He was looking for the sinews, buried deep in the goanna's body, which he carefully pulled out – otherwise the goanna would shrink up in the coals. After that, he could pull out the organs and put them aside for the old people. They always get the most nutritious bits, he told me.

It's a good hunting time, he added, just then at the beginning of the 'knock-'em-down' rain season. The goannas have plenty of flesh after the natural feed available over the previous three months. They are easier to catch too as it is getting cooler, and the animals are all getting sluggish.

I learnt so much from Uncle Markum – stuff I would never learn in school.