

PARKS OF THE LEEUWIN NATURALISTE RIDGE AND SCOTT NATIONAL PARK MANAGEMENT PLAN

ISSUES PAPER

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of the major issues for the management of the Parks of the Leeuwin Naturaliste Ridge. This includes:

- Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park (LNNP);
- Scott National Park;
- the proposed National Parks at Yelverton, Bramley (Margaret River), and Forest Grove;
- Gingilup Nature Reserve;
- the off shore island nature reserves (Augusta Islands, Hamelin and Sugarloaf);
- and the island nature reserves in the Blackwood River at Augusta.

The issues paper is based on one prepared for consideration by the Conservation Commission as part of the management plan review process, with the aim of highlighting some of the issues that the Conservation Commission and the Department of Conservation and Land Management (the Department) will need to consider during the planning process.

Brief Overview

The Parks of the Leeuwin Naturaliste Ridge are some of Western Australia's pre-eminent natural assets. Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park's attractions (scenic coastline with diverse use from surfing and fishing through to family-friendly beaches; caves; scenic forests and heath-lands) ensure that it has the highest visitation of any of WA's national parks, currently 1.4 million per annum. This is a 75% increase over the past decade.

Scott National Park is highly significant for its flora diversity. A major factor in its preservation is the limited access into it. The only recreation site is at Twinems Bend on the Blackwood River, accessible only by boat. It is intended that this level of access will be maintained in this planning cycle.

As part of the Regional Forestry Agreement process, three state forest areas were assessed as being suitable for re-designation as national parks. They are Yelverton (inland from Yallingup and south of Dunsborough); Bramley also known as Margaret River which adjoins the Margaret River township; and Forest Grove, a forest area located between Margaret River and Augusta. This is the first process to assess and plan for the management of their nature conservation, recreation and cultural values.

The region the Parks are located in has one of Australia's fastest growing rates of population growth which is also an ageing demographic. The expected population growth over the next decade will present a major challenge to the integrity of the parks in maintaining their current conservation and recreation values.

The current management plan has been in existence since 1989 and remains current until superseded by a new management plan.

MANAGING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

GENERAL

The general conservation of the existing biodiversity remains a primary objective of the existing parks and reserves covered by this plan. The probable inclusion of additional reserves will complement the already very high level of species diversity represented, which is estimated to be in the order of 500-600 species per square kilometre.

Given this primary objective, there are a number of special taxa and communities that deserve special mention. The current plan makes no mention of these species and therefore will need to make reference to critically endangered species and threatened ecological communities. In addition the plan will need to outline guiding management principles that reflect obligations under the various Acts and international agreements.

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The introduction of conservation covenants on private land adjoining or in close proximity to the park has been implemented recently. There is no mention in the current plan of influence and or support for conservation activities on private land. Given CALM's corporate objective of supporting the conservation of biodiversity on private land, the application and management of conservation covenants is clearly CALM's responsibility.

The assessment of development proposals that are for example located in the proposed wildlife corridors or national park influence zones as outlined in the local town planning schemes is particularly relevant as is the intent of the Leeuwin Naturaliste Ridge Statement of Planning Policy.

Species and Communities of Conservation Importance

There are four critically endangered threatened ecological communities within the Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park. All are associated with the cave systems. These are aquatic root mat communities for which interim recovery plans have been produced and are currently being implemented. There are a number of recovery plan actions that have not been progressed and will need to be addressed during the period of this plan. Further research into these communities is planned.

Ancient microbial communities known as Tufa also occur in several areas within LNNP. These threatened ecological communities are currently listed as endangered.

Native Plants and Plant Communities

There are several declared rare flora species and priority taxa that occur within the parks referred to in this plan. The management of these populations will need to be considered during the planning process.

The mapping and monitoring of these populations will need to continue during the period of the plan as will additional survey work to ensure our knowledge of the flora is comprehensive.

Native Animals and Habitats

The rare white bellied frog, *Geocrinia alba* currently inhabits a number of board wetland sites located along creek systems in the LNNP and Forest Grove, which require special attention in terms of management, particularly in regard to fire and hydrology. These sites are monitored on an annual basis as outlined in the species recovery plan and this will need to continue indefinitely or until the conservation status is reviewed. The management plan therefore should support this action as well as identifying habitat requirements and protection strategies for future and potential translocation sites.

Ring-tailed possums (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*) are common in the parks and reserves in the Capes area but still listed as endangered. Therefore when undertaking any disturbance activity, consideration needs to be given to the habitat of these animals. The fox-baiting program has seen an increase in the numbers of these animals in the LNNP and it is anticipated that this positive response to fox baiting will continue.

The Cape Leeuwin Freshwater Snail *Austroassiminea lethia* occurs at Ellensbrook and Cape Leeuwin and inhabits stream systems and swamps in and around freshwater seepages. The habitats of this species need to be conserved and protected from damage by fire or other disturbances. In addition, accurate maps are needed of potential habitats and a monitoring program initiated during the period of the plan.

There is a need to confirm presence or absence of existing populations of Quokka and Bristle Birds and to develop management strategies for these species if present.

Potential Trans-locations

Investigate the possibility of translocation of Woylie, Quokka and other species with a view to rebuilding the species diversity of the parks.

The Margaret river subspecies of marron is a priority fauna species and there is a need to confirm the status, distribution and management of this species.

There is evidence that the population of New Zealand Fur Seals is expanding. This is likely to create interaction conflicts with park users (boating, swimming and fishing) as Seal haul-out areas increase to include rocky bays and beaches, therefore becoming increasingly susceptible to disturbance from dogs and people. Management strategies for these sites may include some form of zoning to restrict access to particular sites especially in the breeding season.

Environmental Weeds

Biological control of weeds will assist in future management. Of particular concern is bridle creeper. This particular species is very invasive and will be treated as a priority. There is scope for achieving outcomes in this area with the use of volunteers and accessing grant funds through community groups.

Problem Animals

Feral animals such as foxes were a major problem for the parks and reserves covered in the plan prior to the introduction of the Western Shield fox-baiting program. Introduced pigs, rabbits, feral cats, foxes and rats are the main species. The fox baiting program appears to have been successful at reducing the level of predation by foxes on native fauna. The effect of feral cats and pigs is not known but it appears to be less significant than fox predation. The rabbit populations in the parks are mainly confined to private property boundaries and the heath area in the Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park.

It is proposed that the future management of these pests will be undertaken on a case-by-case basis with a view to containing pigs and control or eradication of foxes and this will be dependant on available resources and future developments in methods of control.

Diseases

The risk to the flora from *Phytophthora cinnamomi* is not as great as first thought when the 1989 plan was drafted, as the coastal heath environment is generally not conducive to the survival of the pathogen. This, however, is not the case in some parts of the park or the additional reserves, particularly the Jarrah and Banksia woodlands. As the extent of the disease in all of the parks is not known, opportunistic surveillance and monitoring of the parks to determine the extent of the disease is recommended.

In terms of animal diseases, the only known disease is Chitrid frog fungus. This disease poses a threat to the populations of *Geocrinia alba* that are present in the parks and adjoining private properties. The future management of these areas will include proposals for adequate quarantine measures when works are carried out in or adjacent to these frog sites.

Fire

Fire management for the area is an issue that requires further investigation and review. The location of fuels, local climate and smoke management has played a role in limiting prescribed burns in all the areas designated in the plan.

The following are a number of factors and issues that will need further debate and consideration.

- Areas of no planned burning
- Hazard reduction
- Asset and Settlement protection
- Fire protection plans for facilities
- Fire management on adjoining lands
- Burning for ecological purposes
- Wildfire suppression strategies /techniques for high conservation value sites
- Assessment of fire history.

MANAGING OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE

Indigenous Heritage

This area will be a major outcome of the implementation of “joint management” arrangements to be undertaken between the Department and the local Aboriginal community. Options for Joint Management are outlined further in the paper.

Indigenous heritage encompasses all forms of expression of Aboriginal heritage within the parks. This ranges from physical sites which are registered and protected under the Department for Indigenous Affairs through to expressive forms such as dance and song. Custodianship of the heritage of the parks resides with those Aboriginal people who have authority to speak for the lands.

The management plan will seek to ensure the protection of physical sites and facilitate the interpretation of Aboriginal heritage stories, song and dance to the wider community. Working together, the Department and the local Aboriginal community will be able to protect the physical sites and communicate the Aboriginal heritage to visitors to the Parks.

Non-Indigenous Heritage

The National Trust has registered three sites and one area within Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park. These are the Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse, Ellensbrook House, Cape Leeuwin Waterwheel and the Cape Naturaliste Area. There are other registered sites adjacent to the Park, namely the Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse and cottages, Flinders Bay Settlement and a stone chimney at Karridale.

Sites which have local historical significance and are related to early forestry operations include the remains of the Hamelin Bay jetty, Jarrahdene mill site and (on private land) the Arumvale mill site. Hamelin Bay is also of interest because of the shipwrecks in the bay. Redgate is the site where Grace Bussell and Sam Isaacs rescued the survivors of the wrecked steamer "Georgette".

Historic sites are functionally and visually related to the surrounding area. It is important that any operations or structures which are located near or around sites of historic interest complement the area.

Lighthouses, Wharnccliffe / Heritage

The transfer of the two lighthouse properties into the Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park has been effected. The Expressions of Interest processes is currently underway. The final Masterplan for these properties will be incorporated in the management plan.

Ellensbrook / National Trust Interaction

The Department now manages Ellensbrook on behalf of the National Trust under a lease arrangement.

The security of the lighthouses and Ellensbrook sites is an ongoing issue that is to be handled via the expressions of interest process or the lease with the National Trust. These heritage-listed properties are required to have onsite caretakers present all year round. This issue needs to be reflected in the management plan.

MANAGING RECREATION AND TOURISM

Visitor Access

Horses / Camels

There are currently two areas set aside for this activity, one of which is used on a regular basis near Yallingup but the other area in Boranup is rarely used. There have been a number of requests to have commercial operators utilising camels for safari activities both in the park and on the local beaches. These requests have not proved successful on the basis that they have not been environmentally acceptable. There is scope to prescribe horse or camel use areas in the Margaret River National Park where there has been ongoing historical use for at least 10 years.

4x4 Passenger vehicles and Vehicle Use within the parks

Access to the parks by this form of vehicle is common and is likely to continue. The areas that are accessible have been rationalised to some extent and there are minor areas of further contraction of access required. Access by these vehicles to Deepdene and Hamelin beaches is facilitated in the plan: this situation is manageable and not having a deleterious effect on the environmental values.

There is potential for conflict at the Hamelin Beach during the summer peak period. This conflict could be alleviated by the construction of another access track to the beach further along from the northern end of the carpark. This option will need to be canvassed during the public consultation period for the new plan.

The issue of access by four wheel drive vehicles in the new parks will also need to be assessed and recommendations made in respect to public access versus management only access.

Walk and Cycle Trails and Paths

There has been considerable development of walk trails in the Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park and the Margaret River National Park during the period of the existing plan. This development has resulted in the completion of the Yallingup walk trail network, Cape Naturaliste walk trail network, the completion of the Cape to Cape walk trail, and the walk trails in and around the Margaret River townsite and 10 Mile Brook Dam.

Maintenance of the existing walk trails is ongoing. There is no immediate need to expand the network although it is likely that a network of walk trails in and around Augusta in LNNP will be required. Provision of access paths for disabled visitors is limited and more facilities will need to be considered in this plan. Existing facilities for disabled visitors will need to be upgraded and maintained. The RFA parks are not close to urban areas and there is no need at this time, to consider walk trail networks in these parks.

There is a potential conflict with the Waters and Rivers Commission proposed policy on recreational activity in potable water. To date, there has been no resolution of this issue.

Rock Climbing

Rock climbing is practised on two geological formations within the park on limestone and granite/gneiss. This access issue was not addressed adequately in the previous plan and there are a number of outstanding issues including visitor safety and environmental aspects associated with access to the sites, provision of toilets and staging points. In addition, the issue of rock climbing on limestone at Bob's Hollow will need to be debated further. The planning team will need to consult widely with this user group in an attempt to resolve these issues.

Sandboarding

This activity is relatively new and was not covered in the previous plan. There have been a number of requests to conduct this activity in the LNNP and all requests to date have been denied on environmental grounds. There are no areas suitable for this activity in the parks covered in this plan.

Aircraft - Scenic flight

To date there have only been sporadic scenic flights conducted over the park by a commercial pilot in Augusta. This activity will not become a critical issue in the medium term but in the longer term may need to be addressed. The plan should outline a policy /or process to assess any applications to undertake this activity on a regular basis should it eventuate.

Boating (ramps)

There are two main boat ramps, at Hamelin Bay and Canal Rocks, that are accessed through LNNP.. The Department has for many years been maintaining these on a regular basis. Both have been or will be upgraded in the near future utilising MRD, Department of Transport and internal funds. This issue will also be addressed in the marine park plan currently underway, and will be consistent with that plan.

Water Skiing

This sport is permitted currently at Twinems Bend on a section of the Blackwood River in the Scott River National Park and this activity will need to be monitored and appropriate zoning applied during the period of the plan. This issue may require liaison with the Water and Rivers Commission.

Surfing Policy

The Department and the two local authorities have been working collaboratively to produce a draft Cape to Cape surfing policy to deal with the plethora of surfing competitions that have evolved over the period of the existing plan. The intent of the policy is to try and limit the number and scope of the surfing events to four categories. These categories are international, national, state and local club events. The conditions set and the approved sites in LNNP and shire reserves are different for each category. The management plan will need to clearly outline the intent of this policy and allocate sites to each specific level of event. There is no infrastructure on Departmental estate that would allow for an international event to be carried out in the park. National, State and club events may be held on sites in the park subject to pre-determined conditions.

4x4 Bikes, Trail Bikes

The National Park Regulations prohibit access to the park by unlicensed off road vehicles such as trail bikes and 4x4 motorbikes. Applications to use such vehicles have been made and to date all applications have been denied. This issue will continue as an enforcement issue for all the parks in the Capes area. The plan will need to make a clear policy position on the use of these vehicles.

Recreational Use and Opportunities

Types of visitor and destination

The major attractions are related to the coast, the forest or caves. The level of visitation has consistently increased by a minimum of 8 percent per annum over 11 years. The level of visitation in 1988 was estimated to be in the order of 800 000 visits and now, 11 years later, it is estimated to be 1.4 million visits. Visitors are mainly either individuals visiting for the purposes of surfing or families visiting for a range of experiences.

Trends Of Visitor Use.

The overall trend is for increasing visitor numbers. This will continue as the lighthouses at either cape are now included in the park, and the creation of the other national parks such as Margaret River. These increases comprise mainly of local residents and intra-state visitors holidaying in the Southwest.

Community Education, Visitor Interpretation, Communication and Research

There is little knowledge of visitor use and expectations in the parks covered in this plan. This will require additional surveys to establish what the visitors and park neighbours wish to know, allowing programs and services to be developed that will improve the level and effectiveness of community education and interpretation. This is an area that has acquired some priority in the Department's Corporate Plan 2000-2005.

Volunteers

Use of volunteers in a number of areas of park management has been consistent during the period of the plan. The main areas have been in walk trail development and cave conservation and management, coastal rehabilitation, and campground hosts. This level of volunteer activity is set to continue and possibly increase if the district is successful in gaining additional grant application funding for additional projects in the caves, walk trails and coastal rehabilitation. The plan needs to recognise this important contribution and provide scope for volunteerism to continue.

Caves

Significant progress in cave management has been made during the period of the plan, with the development of Calgardup and Giants caves and the cave permit system. These initiatives are now poised to contribute to cave conservation in other caves on the ridge during the period of this plan.

Public Access to Caves. (Authorised and unauthorised)

Access to the caves has progressed from unrestricted and unmanaged access to a system of controlled and managed access to the vast majority of karst features on the ridge. It is proposed that the system of controlled and managed access will be reviewed annually and continue to afford an acceptable level of protection to this valuable resource.

There is still scope to improve this level of management by providing additional infrastructure to better manage access to the caves, and provide interpretive materials to enhance visitor experiences both above and below ground. This infrastructure will assist in the conservation of the caves and, in some cases, the threatened ecological communities that occur in a number of the caves on the ridge.

There is a requirement to monitor the impacts of the recent change in visitor management on the threatened root mat communities.

Permit Access

The provision of access to self-guided class 2 and 3 caves by way of the cave permit system has been successful and is proposed to continue for the period of this plan. The commercial tour operators who are the main users of the system are generally supportive of this approach and can see the merits of the system.

The introduction of the cave trip leadership training program has also been of significant benefit to cave conservation and visitor safety. The plan is constantly reviewed and will support the overall approach to responsible cave management.

Restricted Access

Currently, the restricted access caves are available to members of recognised speleological clubs only. This approach has been working well and to date there are no further recommendations for future management.

Abseil Sites

There are a number of sites in LNNP that are available to commercial operators and other visitor groups for the purposes of abseiling. This activity is managed as part of the cave permits system. There has been an improvement on the previously unmanaged system since the inception of the National Park. Previously there was no formal management system in place for abseiling as user groups visited a range of sites in the park on an adhoc basis.

There are limits set on the levels of use at each site, which includes restrictions on the numbers of participants and the number of groups allocated to each site on any one day. This approach needs to be endorsed in the plan. In addition, there needs to be some consideration given to broadening the range of sites that are available. This will need to be examined further. The existing group of commercial operators would like to see additional sites made available at Gracetown, Moses Rock and Cosy Corner. The argument used to justify this expansion is based on the need to provide a wider variety of sites and to take the visitor pressure off the existing sites. This will be tempered by the need to consider the impacts on the cliff environs and visitor risk issues.

Cave Conservation, Ecosystems and Hydrology

Broad land use decisions made upstream from the catchment areas of the cave and karst system need to be examined further. The quality of the water entering the cave systems has the potential to adversely impact on these fragile ecosystems. Though this may be beyond the scope of this plan, the monitoring of impacts on the caves is not.

There are other fundamental questions of what level of human access to caves is acceptable, and whether the current management systems are adequately protecting the caves.

During the period of the plan a program of systematic monitoring of karst sites for environmental degradation will need to be implemented.

The following tasks will also require attention:-

- water quality monitoring at critical sites including the sites of the endangered root mat communities.
- the 'carrying capacity' of Calgardup and Giants Caves, and other cave and abseil sites, will need to be determined as required.

Research

The Department is assisting the Augusta Margaret River Tourist Association with a research project on the hydrology and botany/biology of the caves managed by the association. The results of this initial research will provide an insight as to what additional research is required, and provide information on the hydrology on the Leeuwin Ridge. A recommendation of this plan may be to promote research in the fields of hydrology and hydrogeology of cave systems.

Recreation Development and Maintenance

There are 64 sites and a large number of public access roads in LNNP alone. There have been extensive site development works carried out over the period of the plan, which require ongoing maintenance. Maintenance and improvement of existing infrastructure should receive priority over new developments. Any future development in the park will need to be of strategic importance to all the parks in the Cape area. A major focus for this plan will be on the planning and completion of a park visitor centre that services all the parks in the area.

A major area of concern is the large number of coastal car parks and facilities that cater for surfing and fishing access. The management of these carparks need to be considered in catering for increasing levels of visitation including by coaches. To provide the necessary infrastructure is costly. The plan will need to deal with this proliferation of sites in a strategic manner.

Conto's

The scope and extent of any future development for this site needs to be considered during the planning process. Fire management also needs to be addressed.

Additional Sites in Other Reserves

There are no formal recreation sites in Forest Grove or Yelverton. The Scott River National Park has one formal site at Twinems Bend on the Blackwood River. The plan will need to mention the possibility of future site development in these parks subject to public consultation and compliance with the Department's environmental assessment procedures.

TOURISM

Park Visitor Centre

This is a major focus for the Department during the period of the plan, and preliminary planning has occurred. The management plan will need to outline guiding principles that will allow staff to plan this development so it not only meets the Department's overall objectives but also assists in achieving many of the objectives of the management plan. This will include the Department's areas of community education, interpretation and communication.

Visitor Safety

There is always an element of risk in all outdoor recreation activities. Nevertheless, all reasonable and practicable efforts will be taken to ensure that risks are minimised.

In addition to the dangers inherent in any natural area, the parks pose some particular problems for visitors including:

- dehydration and heat exhaustion from insufficient intake of water and over-exposure to the sun;
- incidents associated with bushwalking on rough tracks in natural areas, (eg sprained ankles, cuts and bruises);
- possibility of being bitten by native animals (eg snakes, spiders, ants);
- threat of wildfire, particularly to bushwalkers on tracks and campers in bush settings;
- coastline dangers (eg fishing on rocks, unpredictable waves);
- caving (eg access to caves has to be defined to account for peoples' different levels of ability);
- karst formations (eg ongoing natural processes to karst formations have to be monitored to evaluate safety implications and appropriate measures implemented).

Visitor safety will be promoted through information and education about potential problems and dangers and considered in design of access and recreation sites. The Police, State Emergency Service (SES) and the Department manage incidents and search and rescue operations in the area. Management actions to reduce safety hazards should, if possible, be planned in sympathy with the purpose of the parks and should not unduly on the experience of visitors.

Managing Sustainable Resource Use

Mining

The existing plan deals with this adequately. There has been little interest in exploration within the LNNP although there is interest in mineral sands in or near the Yelverton and Scott River National Parks. There is a current mining lease over the south eastern portion of the proposed Yelverton National Park.

Professional Fishing

This activity is continuing in LNNP although at a reduced level than when the existing plan was prepared. The current strategies and actions, however, are still relevant at this time. The professional fishers have been co-operating and supporting small projects to alleviate erosion problems associated with access to a number of areas utilised by this industry. The main access requirements are seasonal when netting salmon from the shore is undertaken.

Commercial Tour Operators / Licence Holders

There are 105 licensed commercial operators in the Capes parks but these are mainly focused on the LNNP and on the Blackwood River. The current group are regular operators who are familiar with the operational requirements of operating on Departmental lands. The main issues relate to payment of park entry fees rather than management.

Involving The Community

Park Advisory Committee

The Leeuwin Naturaliste Advisory Committee has been active during the period of the plan and has provided significant support to the Department's activities during this time. The revision of the plan will be a key area where the committee can assist in community liaison as well as contribute valuable comment on the future management of the parks in the Capes area.

The role and structure of the advisory committee may alter with the emergence of a Park Council structured to meet the needs of Aboriginal people in the management of the parks. (*refer to Involving the Aboriginal Community below*)

The Cave Management Advisory Committee has also been active during the period of the plan and has contributed to the development of the Cave and Abseil Permit System and other initiatives. CMAC will continue to provide valuable input to the management of the karst in the Blackwood District.

Indigenous Heritage / Indigenous Involvement in Management

Government policy provides for an increased level of Aboriginal involvement in nature conservation and land management than has previously occurred. More specifically, consultation and liaison with Aboriginal people regarding management of conservation reserves is to be strengthened, and movements towards joint management are proposed. To this end, the management planning process for these parks and reserves will seek to establish formal processes for Aboriginal consultation and interaction in management planning.