



GO LIGHTLY: minimising the impact

People visit the bush for all kinds of reasons: escape, adventure, challenge, discovery, rest. But as our population grows and becomes more mobile, the sheer pressure of numbers can turn a beauty spot into a rubbish tip. Today's land managers must find a balance between enabling us to enjoy the natural environment and conserving the very values for which we go there.

by
Wayne Schmidt & Mandy Clews

The place: a secluded forest block in the South West. The time: the early 1970s. Twenty or so tents have been pitched along the picturesque riverside. A handful of campers have come seeking a weekend of bushwalking, swimming and fishing in the peaceful forest. At dusk, the low murmur of voices rises intermittently to happy chatter as families prepare meals and get ready for nightfall. As darkness falls, silence descends. The activities of the day are given over to the occasional thumping of foraging kangaroos and the rustling of possums in the trees.

The same place, twenty years later. A 50-car capacity carpark is overflowing with 100 vehicles. A tent city has spread back in concentric semicircles from the eroded riverbank. First-in-best-dressed waterfront campsites have become walk-through thoroughfares for many other campers. No one is catching any fish.

This sounds like an extreme example, but in the space of two decades, the number of visitors to many of Western Australia's beauty spots has risen dramatically. At Dwellingup, for example, the estimated number of visitors to Lane Poole Reserve rose nearly tenfold, from 25 000 in 1973 to just under 220 000 in 1990. There are many such places around the State, idyllic forest retreats, wild stretches of coast, rugged inland hills



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Four-wheel-drive vehicles are often the only way that some remote and beautiful parts of WA can be explored.
Photo – Bill Bachman

Above: Western Australia's native flora is world-renowned and represents one of the State's most important nature-based recreation and tourism attractions.

Below: Recreation vehicle access to beach areas has been one of the most controversial management issues confronting State and local government authorities.
Photos – Robert Garvey

and valleys, that are under pressure from high visitor numbers.

Such a rapid increase in impact on the environment can be difficult to foresee. The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) is charged with conserving WA's national parks and other conservation reserves for future

generations. But short of shutting people out, how is this sort of impact to be managed?

There are no instant fixes, but there is a long-term solution. Environmental management does not have to mean locking nature away from people. On the contrary, there is a place for human





Above: Campers vie with one another for a 'front row' riverside site. Left unmanaged, such use can cause significant environment degradation and visitor conflict.

Photo – Maxine Cooper-Copeman

Above right: Many of the State's coastal landforms are very sensitive to human disturbance and can be easily damaged by uncontrolled vehicle access.

Photo – Wayne Schmdt



presence in most natural areas. The goal is to make that presence a caring, appreciative one. Encouraged to behave responsibly, to observe, and to learn as they enjoy the outdoors, visitors are being invited to become partners in the conservation process.

A GIANT PLAYGROUND

CALM manages a total of nearly 200 000 square kilometres of land and water, a huge area, almost the size of the State of Victoria, which received more than four million visits last year. On the basis of these staggering numbers alone, the chief responsibility for behaving sensitively in natural areas has to rest with the visitors themselves.

Environmental management is often a delicate partnership with the public. While it is necessary to have some restrictions in management schemes, such as for public safety, no one wants to arrive at a recreation area only to be faced with a barrage of signs indicating that 'you can't do this' or 'you shouldn't do that'. Some people see such signs as a challenge and rebel, whereas others may be offended by them and leave the area feeling their visit had been spoilt. By far the most effective tool in managing people pressure is to offer information, education and enrichment to those

seeking outdoor recreation. After all, the natural environment is theirs to enjoy.

One way to address the needs of visitors is to offer high-quality recreational experiences. A sealed track that runs three-and-a-half kilometres around Big Brook Dam gives wheelchair-confined people an opportunity to experience the karri forest at close quarters. A guided boat ride takes visitors into little-known reaches of the spectacular Geikie Gorge. Visitor centres at Milyering in Cape Range National Park, Millstream and Northcliffe provide a popular range of interpretive activities. National parks around the State offer ranger-led programs such as walks, slide presentations, night-time spotlighting tours and more, all examples of how CALM is adding value to nature-based recreation.

But perhaps the most important and long-lasting strategy in balancing protection and public enjoyment of nature is to involve visitors.

FORGING PARTNERSHIPS

Under the CALM Act, any area vested as a national park must have a management plan. CALM has already prepared a large number of these, always in consultation with the community. Such a plan will include ways of managing the impact of visitors on areas—for example, by providing greatest access to areas most capable of carrying visitors, offering a range of high-quality recreational opportunities, constructing tourist facilities, designing interpretive and instructive signs and providing literature. Local government, community interest groups, nearby landowners, farmers and pastoralists, are all

encouraged to take part in drawing up the plan. Comment is invited from the wider public when the draft management plan is completed.

Once public comments have been taken into consideration and the formal management plan is in place, the spirit of partnership with the public continues. In addition to facilities, recreational opportunities and a constantly updated supply of interpretive literature, CALM offers courses through Bob Cooper Outdoor Education in outback safety, bushcraft and minimum impact camping and bushwalking. In conjunction with four-wheel-drive clubs, CALM has supported education programs in four-wheel-driving. Evidence, so far, supports what managers have long thought to be the case: little environmental damage is caused wilfully. People simply have not been aware of the collective consequences of their actions in the bush. All that is changing.

An unusual success story to emerge from transferring responsibility to the public has been the removal of rubbish bins from selected national parks. Some years ago, as a trial, bins in several parks were replaced with signs advising visitors they were to be responsible for their own rubbish. When it was first proposed, this experiment met with some scepticism and doubt from staff, who were concerned that the rubbish problem would proliferate beyond recovery. But surprisingly, volumes of rubbish have since been greatly reduced in most areas, and, in many places, litter has ceased to be a problem altogether. These results are building confidence in the process of sharing responsibility. If people see a

TREAD LIGHTLY!

Originally launched in the United States in 1989, the *Tread Lightly!* program was a ground-breaking experiment in making the bush-going public self-regulating. The need arose with the staggering increase in sales of what Americans call 'recreational vehicles'. All around the country, forest managers were unable to cope with the increased numbers of liberated people. Visitors had to be educated and relied upon to take responsibility for themselves.

Although born out of trends in the vehicle market, *Tread Lightly!*'s message ranges far beyond four-wheel-driving to include all manner of outdoor activities. The two governing principles of *Tread Lightly!* are virtually the same as those underlying CALM's strategies: almost all damage to the environment is caused through lack of knowledge, and teaching people how to prevent it is better than shutting them out. Sponsoring bodies from the public and private sector are able to use the *Tread Lightly!* logo and promotional materials in fashioning an environmentally friendly image. Meanwhile, bumper stickers, brochures and other publicity urges trail-bikers, mountain cyclists, rock-climbers and bushwalkers to follow the acronym:

- ❖ Travelling only where permitted
- ❖ Respecting others' rights
- ❖ Educating oneself
- ❖ Avoiding animals and easily damaged areas
- ❖ Driving responsibly

The Australian National Four-Wheel-Drive Council immediately recognised the program's advantages and bought a licence from the American organisation. Realising that to be accepted by the general public, *Tread Lightly!* should not be seen as a hostage of any so-called 'lobby group' (no matter how well-intentioned they might be), the Council stepped back in favour of a totally independent company being set up to run the program.

The result: Australia's own fully independent *Tread Lightly! on Public and Private Land* — A National Land Use Ethics Program officially came into being in 1993. It now has the formal support of a number of State conservation agencies around Australia, including CALM, as well as sponsorship from the private sector.

Public membership is also welcome and information can be obtained by writing to: *Tread Lightly! on Public and Private Land*, Box 123, Coorparoo, QLD 4151, or by telephoning 1 800 650 881 (toll free).



bin, even an overflowing bin, they get the impression that someone else is looking after the problem. Acting in good faith, they will lay their bag of rubbish next to all the others, where it will be torn apart by scavenging animals and strewn across the ground. If, on the other hand, they know they are being depended upon and trusted, they will carry their waste away with them.

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

In developing its public partnership strategies, CALM owes a great deal to its successful relationship with the WA Association of Four-Wheel-Drive Clubs. The two organisations were first brought together ten years ago in the process of management planning for the Shannon-D'Entrecasteaux National Park. When four-wheel-drive enthusiasts became concerned that access to traditional recreation spots along the coast would be cut off, they formed an interest group called 'Keep Our Coast Open'. Obviously, there was a need to communicate more effectively with the growing number of four-wheel-drive owners in WA, so an informal partnership was formed to exchange information and assist each other in planning the conservation and management of recreation areas.

Largely through the efforts of key Association member Steve Wilke, the two agencies have established a lasting and effective line of communication. Most four-wheel-drive clubs now inform CALM staff of their plans when organising an excursion into a CALM-managed area. Staff are then able to support the excursion with maps and advice.

But more exciting are the positive initiatives that have been undertaken jointly by the two agencies. For example, last year at CALM's Gnangara pine plantation, members of four-wheel-drive clubs donated their vehicles, tow-ropes, trailers and skill during a massive clean-up of old car-bodies. More recently, club members helped in a major weed-control operation at John Forrest National Park. In return, a ranger later led the vehicles along some restricted tracks normally closed to the public. And in March this

Left: Western Australia's expansive outback areas are a mecca for a growing armada of 4WD-equipped adventurers. Photo – Bill Bachman



Above: The thoughtless actions of just one irresponsible visitor can leave an impact that can take years or even decades to heal.

Photo – Wayne Schmidt



Above right: The promotion of 'minimal impact' or 'no-trace' camping is an important initiative in the management and protection of back country areas and wilderness values.

Photo – Cliff Winfield

Right: Resource protection and management programs, which place a major emphasis on visitor information and education, are preferable to locking areas up and shutting people out.

Photo – Marie Lochman



year, clubs rallied to help in a major weekend clean-up of badly littered areas near Pemberton.

Steve Wilke has been instrumental in developing the environmental ethics of the four-wheel-drive clubs in WA. He created the position of Environmental Officer in all clubs and helped transform the culture of four-wheel-drive recreation from the bush-bashing of the 1970s to today's aim of maximising enjoyment while minimising impact on the environment.

In fact, four-wheel-drive clubs have become so environmentally conscious that their peak organisation, the Australian National Four-Wheel-Drive Council, was the driving force in setting up a nationwide education campaign to minimise recreational impact on the environment. Called *Tread Lightly!*, the campaign is making steady progress in reforming our ideas of how to behave in the bush.

WEALTH FOR EVERYONE

Turning to nature for recreation is spiritually enriching, but it also offers another kind of wealth. Nature-based tourism is on the increase in WA, as it is the world over. In business terms, it is one of the world's fastest-growing industries. With its unique flora and fauna, WA stands to reap rich rewards from the world's increasing environmental consciousness. Tourism is already one of our biggest income and employment generators, and visitor surveys have shown natural features to be the number one attraction to overseas visitors.

But the ethics of caring for the environment must still abide. Local appreciation of our natural wonders is still very strong—statistics show that by far the highest proportion of visits to natural areas in WA are by Western Australians.

If 'people pressure' is the right way to describe the undesirable impact of a high number of users, the growth in the nature-based tourism industry might be expected to aggravate the problem. At the same time, the provision of high-quality nature-based recreation, educational experiences and a sense of partnership should help diminish it.

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