

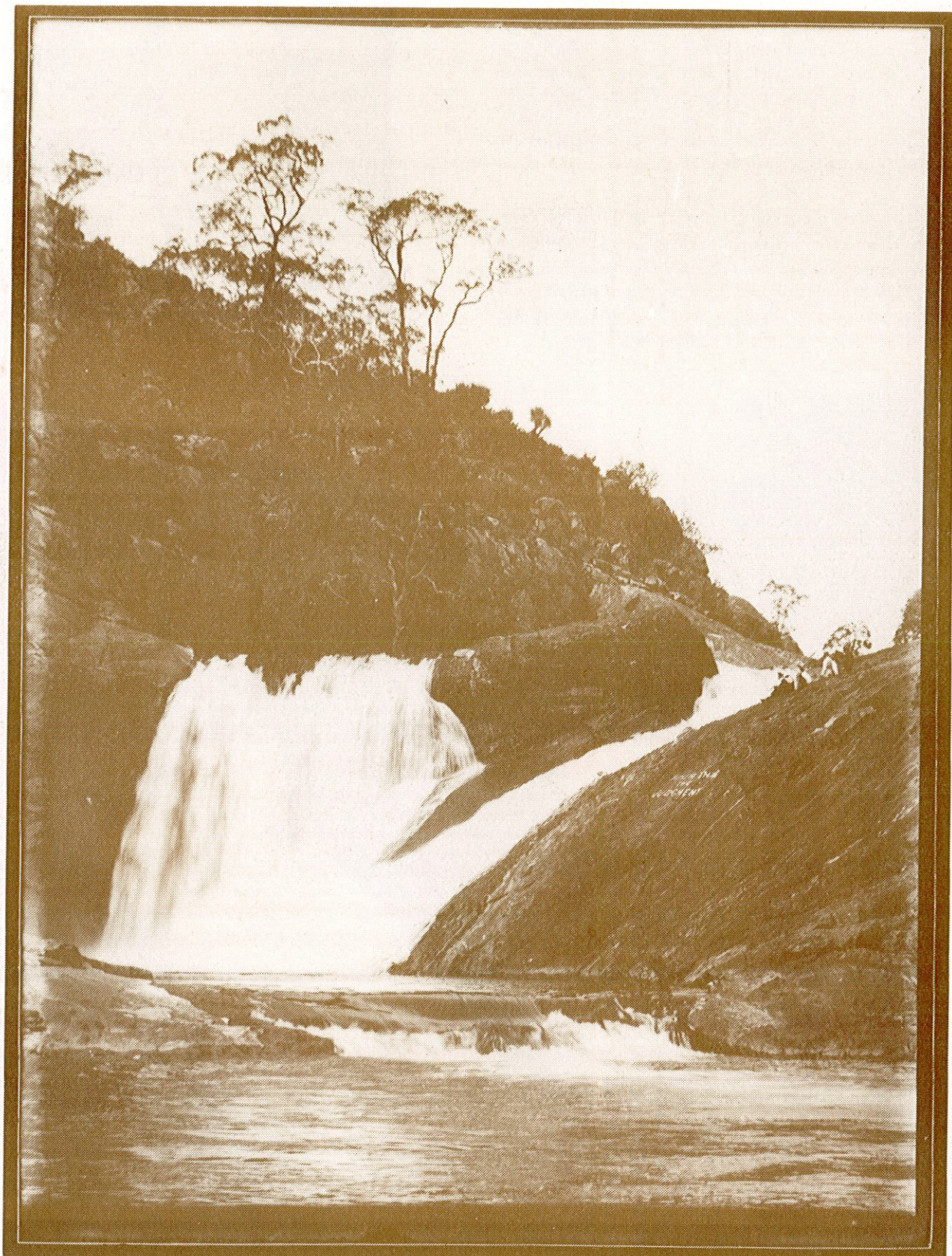
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SERPENTINE NATIONAL PARK ... A BRIEF HISTORY

by Jennifer H. Jackman-Muir
31 August, 1982



The Serpentine Falls, early 1900s.

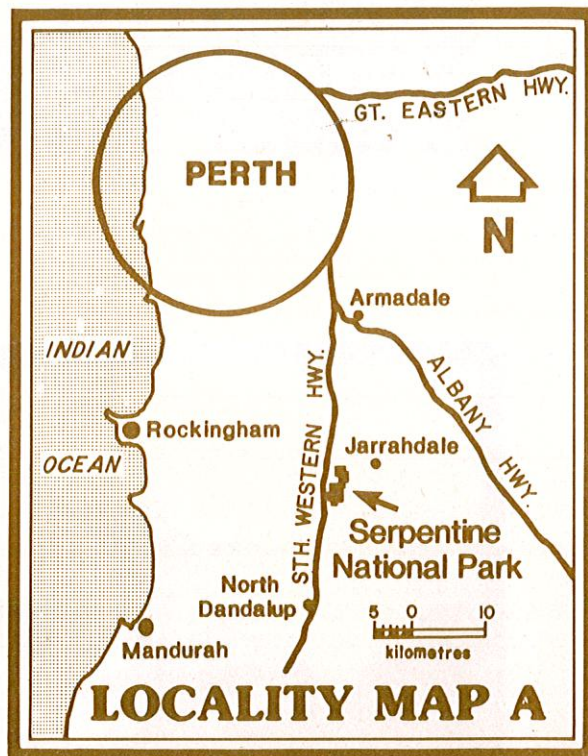
Photo: courtesy Battye Library (no. 5323B/1513).

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Serpentine National Park, an A Class Reserve of 635 hectares, is situated some 50 kilometres south-east of Perth on the Darling Scarp. The Park is important as it includes two rare trees — the Butter Gum *Eucalyptus laeliae* on the slopes, and the Salmon White Gum *Eucalyptus lane-poolei* at the foot of the Scarp — as well as open forests of Jarrah and Marri. It is near an area which is extensively mined for bauxite and logged for Jarrah, a tree which is susceptible to dieback disease. The Serpentine Falls, within the Park, have been set aside as part of the National Estate.

The first people to tread the ground in the Serpentine area were Aborigines who, undoubtedly, hunted and camped in the woodlands and raised their families there, perhaps as long ago as 30,000 years before European settlement. The Serpentine River would have provided them with their water and some of their food, such as fish, mussels, etc.



Close-up of the Falls, early 1900s. There was a good flow of water at the time. Note the visitors near the top.

Photo: Battye Library (no. 5323B/1512).



View from the top of the falls, early 1900s, looking west along the Serpentine River — now part of the National Park.

Photo: Battye Library (no. 5323B/1503).

Europeans became interested in Western Australia from as early as the Seventeenth Century, after visits by Portuguese, Dutch, British and French ships. In June 1801 after a major French expedition ordered by Napoleon had arrived off the Western Australian coast, J.F.E. Hamelin des Essarts, commander of the ship "Naturaliste" went about 30 kilometres inland. He referred in his Journal to a river he thought to be the Swan River. However, some historians suggest this was the Serpentine River not the Swan. Therefore he may well have been the first European to set foot in the vicinity of the present National Park.

On Christmas Day 1826 Major Edmund Lockyer and a detachment of British soldiers arrived at King George Sound, (where Albany is today) and the first British settlement in Western Australia commenced. This was designed to prevent the French or any other interested party from occupying the State.

Just over two years later, in 1829, the Swan River Colony was established.

Gradually the settlers from the new colonies spread out, taking up more and more land for farming. By the 1890's, much land had been cleared and people began to realise that the natural vegetation was disappearing, and with it, the animals.

So it was in January 1894 that the Western Australian Natural

History Society (formed in 1891 with Sir John, later Lord Forrest, as President) petitioned the then State Government to set aside a specified reserve to protect some of the indigenous fauna and flora. Thus the first Reserve for Fauna and Flora in Western Australia, Murray Reserve No. 2461, of 160,000 acres, "between Pinjarra, North Dandalup and Bannister" was proclaimed in February 1894.

However, in 1897 the Reserve was reduced for timber cutting and soon there were more such demands. In March 1901 Surveyor Absalon wrote to the Surveyor General asking that the Reserve be cancelled and thrown open for selection. In 1902 he was sent out to inspect the Reserve, and in his report to the Surveyor General, he said he had "no hesitation" in stating the Reserve entirely unsuitable. He recommended it be cancelled and part of it be opened up for orchard blocks and the rest for timber leases. Reserve 2461 was therefore cancelled in April 1911 despite protests from concerned persons.

During that same trip however, Surveyor Absalon also visited the Serpentine Falls area. He commented on the wide variety of flowers and said these could be protected in some natural beauty spot such as the Falls. He said the area was rapidly being denuded of flora and recommended a "permanent caretaker" be placed at the Serpentine Falls, to preserve the flora and protect it from the "trainloads of excursionists who visit the Serpentine Falls every flower season".

It appears the Serpentine Falls were already within a Reserve (no. 3355, Class A — Public Recreation, gazetted August 1900 — see no. 1 on map B), but it is not known if a caretaker was placed at the Falls or not. Records indicate however, that the reserved area around the Falls was subsequently enlarged, as three other blocks of land were set aside as parklands in 1903. See nos. 2, 3 and 4 on map B.

Around the turn of the century, part of the area now within the present day Serpentine National Park was mined for gold and silver by men who worked the Darling Range ridges as far south as the Donnybrook and Greenbushes gold and tin fields. Remains of the old mines persisted until 1981, when several open mine shafts were filled in as they were considered dangerous.

About 1911, the Public Works Department installed a gauging station and weir to measure the amount of water flowing over the Falls. To date (1982) the station still stands and the weir wall forms the now very popular swimming pool at the base of the Falls.

In November 1914, control and management of the Falls area itself (Reserve no. A3355) was handed to the State Hotels Department, a small department administered from the Colonial Secretary's office, and headed by a General Manager. Several years later, in 1922, the Serpentine-Jarrahdale Road Board took control.

Before 1928, certain areas in the vicinity were thrown open for selection, but because it was considered that the scenic

beauty of the Falls area constituted a national asset, protests were made to the Government. This resulted in withdrawal of the areas from selection in 1928. The chairman of the new State Gardens Board (formed December 1920) inspected these blocks and recommended a reserve for park and recreation. Thus in February 1930 four more blocks were added to the Serpentine Falls area. These four blocks, collectively numbered A20357, (see no.5 on map B) were handed to the State Gardens Board, which was at that time under the management of Mr L.E. Shapcott and Mr C.G. Morris. Later, in August 1931, Reserves A3355 (the Falls) and A8615 were handed to the Board and Reserve 23894 passed to the Board's control in April 1954; thus by 1954 all the reserves north of, and including the Falls at Serpentine, were in the hands of the State Gardens Board. In the 1930s the area was sometimes known as Campion Park.

The Falls were a very popular picnic spot partly due to their scenic qualities, their proximity to Perth and the fact that there are few waterfalls in the south-west of Western Australia. They often appeared in tourist booklets as popular tourist sites and were considered one of the main attractions of the Darling Range.

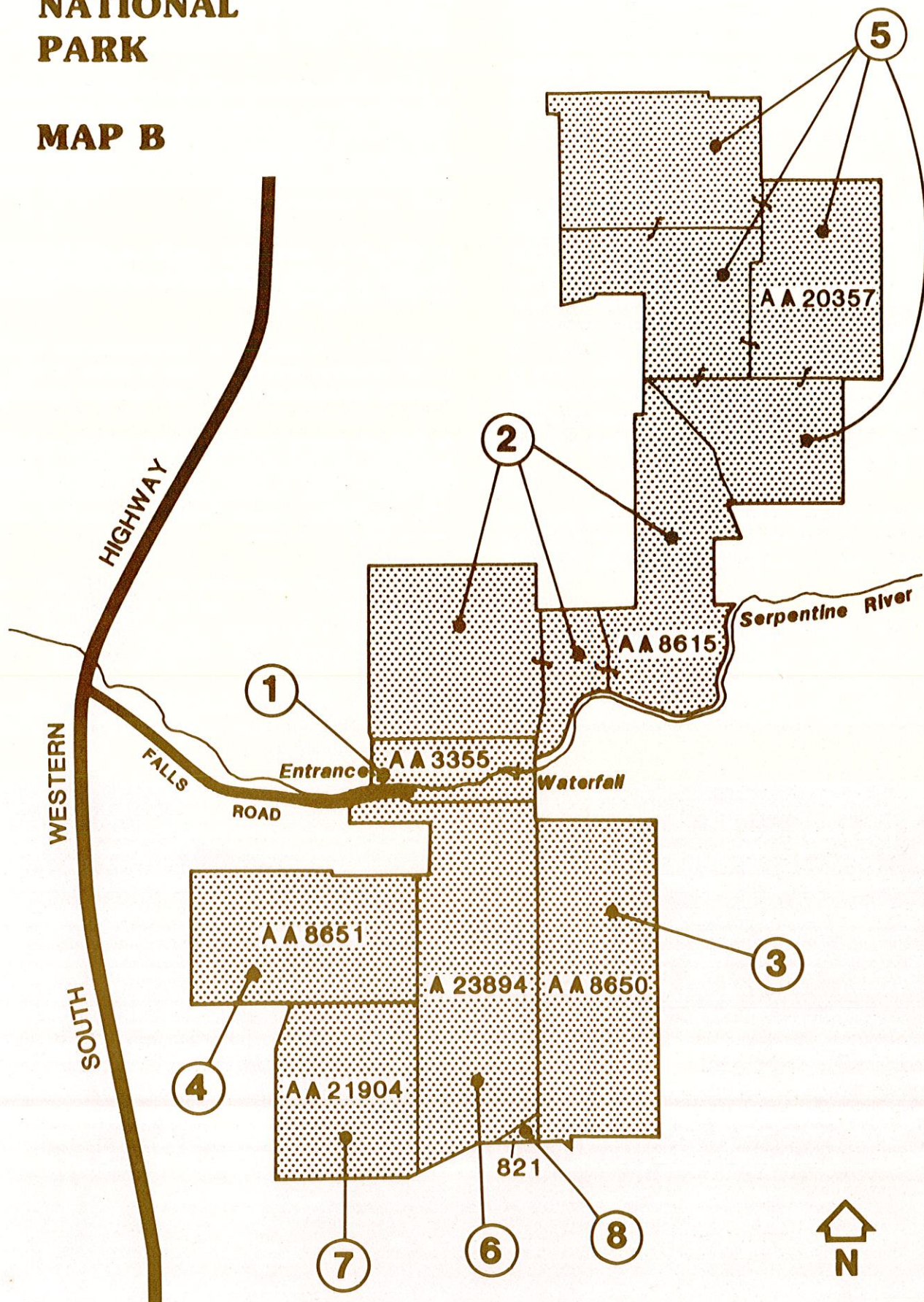
On 13 April 1956, the State Gardens Board became the National Parks Board, resulting in a strengthening of conservation policy and a general review of all management procedures. In the following year all the Serpentine Reserves together were vested in the National Parks Board and another large block (Reserve 23894) added. See no. 6 on map B.



c.1910. Trainloads of excursionists visited the Serpentine Falls every wildflower season. Visitors can be seen on both sides of the pool, while still more are coming down the slope left of the Falls. Some had climbed the rock to the right of the Falls. Photo: courtesy Battye Library (no. 25054P).

SERPENTINE NATIONAL PARK

MAP B



In the 1950s the Metropolitan Water Supply commenced the task of damming the Serpentine River, and the Pipe Head Dam 7 kilometres upstream from the Falls was completed in 1957. This stopped the River and hence the Falls flowing during the dry season. By then the gauging weir was used as a swimming pool, so to keep the pool water fresh, water from the dam was, and still is, piped from the dam directly into the pool. Over the years since then, the National Parks Board requested that this water be piped to a spot above the Falls instead of below them, as the Falls would then run most of the year. Even today, however, the Falls still only run in winter.

By October 1961 some development in the Reserves had taken place. This included a road into the Falls area, construction of change rooms and toilets and the provision of a picnic area with tables, seats and fireplaces for barbeques. Mr Wilfred E. Baldwin had been installed as caretaker sometime before February 1957 and lived close to the site. The toilets had been installed even earlier — in 1954 — at a cost of £1,604! A ticket collector's box had been built in August 1958 by the Public Works Department. It cost £69. As well, there was a timber bridge of uncertain age just below the Falls, but this was burnt down during wildfires in the summer of 1962/63.

In July 1963, Reserve A21904 (till then a quarry) was set aside for Park, Recreation and Conservation of Flora and Fauna, and vested in the National Parks Board. See no.7 on Map B.

During 1964 a Mobile Ranger (Mr N. Walmsley) with a 4-wheel drive vehicle and caravan was appointed to maintain the Reserves during the week. Mr Baldwin continued as part-time caretaker and ticket collector on Sundays and public holidays. Mr Baldwin died in 1968 and his son took over from him.

By 1968, further development of roads and parking facilities by the Main Roads Department in co-operation with the National Parks Board improved access into the Falls area. A one lane vehicle bridge, originally planned in 1966, but delayed due to lack of funds, was completed with the assistance of the Main Roads Department early in 1971, giving access to the picnic area on the north side of the River.

In March 1968, all the then Reserves (nos. 1-7 on Map B) were officially amalgamated into one Class A Reserve (no. 28862) for the purpose of National Park and were vested in the National Parks Board in July 1968. However it was not until 15 October 1971 that the name "Serpentine National Park" was officially declared.

In 1974 Lot 821 (see no. 8 on map B) was added to the Park. This addition had been suggested by a tourist who had visited the Park shortly before.

During 1975, the Park had an honorary Ranger who lived in the Serpentine township. Camping within the Park was permitted and there was a fifty cent admission fee charged.

In 1976, administrative changes resulted in the National Parks Board becoming the National Parks Authority as it is today, with further developments in policies and procedures. In the same year the first full-time Resident Ranger (Mr R. Elston) was installed in the Park.

Further works were undertaken within the Park and in 1980 the construction of a new path and elevated decking with rehabilitation of the original path resulted in an aesthetic approach and easier walk to the Falls and pool.

Today, the Serpentine National Park has a high visitation and further development over the years will probably help to increase its popularity.



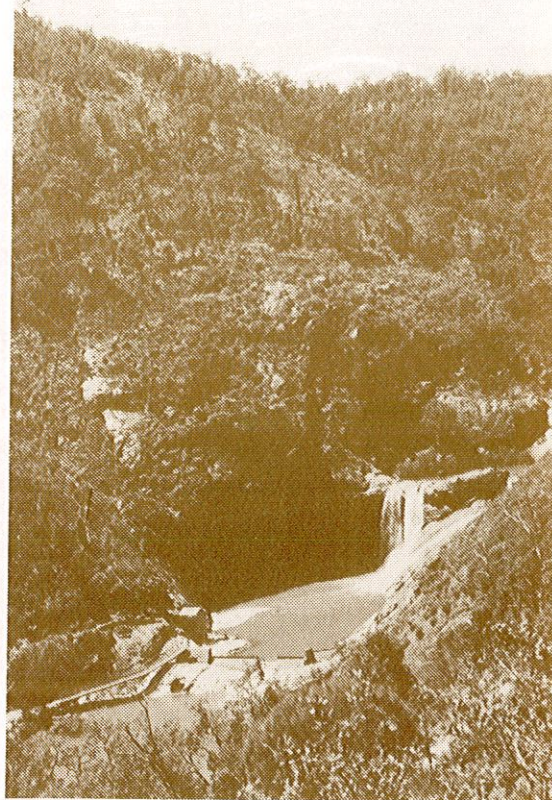
The timber footbridge just below the Falls, c.1920s/1930s — burnt down during summer 1962/1963. Note the good water flow over the Falls.
Photo: courtesy Battye Library (no. 2555B/3/X098).

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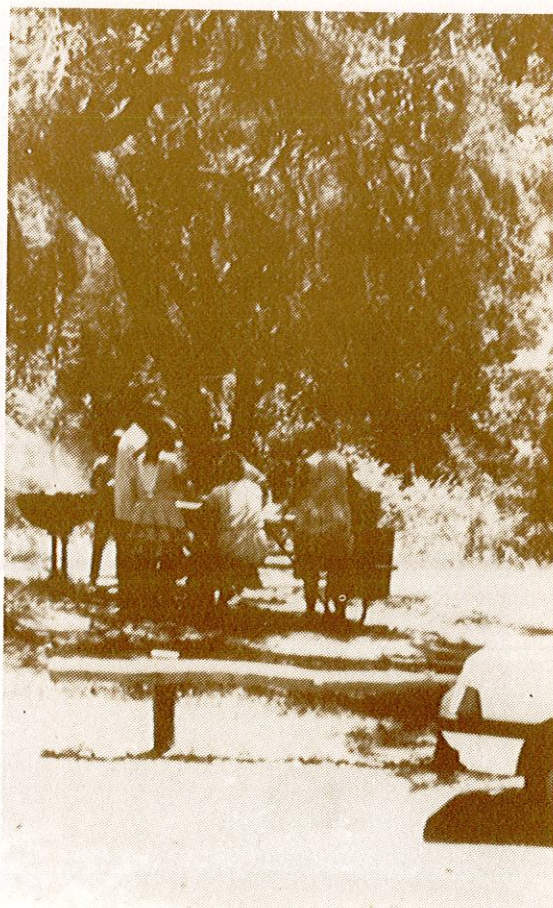
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank The National Parks Authority of Western Australia for allowing access to its files and records. Additionally, the Battye Library of W.A. History, the Royal Western Australian Historical Society and Mrs J. Court gave permission to use photographs in this publication. Thanks are also extended to Mr J. Hunter for preparation of the final layout and to Miss L. Nutini for cartography. Further, I would like to thank Mr B. Muir for criticising the manuscript and for his helpful advice.



Serpentine National Park Falls area 1982.
Photo: J. Hunter, National Parks



A BBQ in the facilities area 1983. Photo B. Muir.



"Serpentine Falls and Pool", c.1900. This photo is of a very large framed print prepared for wall hanging. It is believed the print was hand-coloured.
 Photo: courtesy Battye Library (no. 653P).



Another early view (date unknown) of the Falls, probably used for illustrated black and white postcards very popular early this century.
 Photo: courtesy Battye Library (no. 24462P).