WELLINGTON NATIONAL PARK
ISSUES PAPER

Introduction

This paper contains a summary of the major issues to be considered in preparing a management plan for the Wellington National Park, the proposed additions to the national park, and the proposed Mungalup and Westralia Conservation Parks (see Map 1 – Planning Area). It has been prepared for consideration by the Conservation Commission, and as information for the public (in a modified form if necessary) as part of the management planning process.

Brief Overview

The planning area surrounds or lies in close proximity to the Wellington Dam, 8.5 km west of Collie. The Dam and surrounding area is popular with local residents and residents from the Perth metropolitan area for recreation activities such as bushwalking, swimming, marron and trout fishing, sailing, rowing, camping, canoeing, mountain biking, sightseeing, four wheel and scenic driving.

The most contentious issue concerning the park is the use of the Wellington Dam as a source of potable drinking water and the effect that this may have on recreation and visitor access. Currently, water within the Dam is used for irrigation supply and is not suitable as a drinking water supply because the health risks associated with the existing water quality are too high. However, water within the Dam is expected to become potable within the next 10 years because of a reduction in water salinity levels. As a result, there is likely to be trading between irrigation water allocations and drinking water allocations, with an expected demand for 12 to 25 million kilolitres of drinking water for local consumption, for the Great Southern Towns Water Supply, or for Perth. This may change the activities permitted on and around the water body, in particular recreational activities.

Regional Context

The Wellington National Park is located within the Shire of Collie in the southwest of Western Australia and surrounds the Wellington Dam, a water supply capacity of 185 gigalitres used primarily for irrigation but important for industry and as a potential domestic supply. The town of Collie (population 8 500) is the nearest town, approximately 8.5 km west). The Dam (built in 1931) has more recently been used for water sports both upstream and downstream of the dam wall. It is fed by the Collie River, which drains a catchment of 2 800 km^2. The river spills into the Leschenault Inlet, 40 km below the dam, just before entering the Indian Ocean near Bunbury, Western Australia's largest regional centre (about 200 km south of Perth).

The shores of the reservoir and lower Collie River valley are key features of the Wellington National Park and provide popular recreational settings for visitors from the local and Perth metropolitan areas. Most of the visitors to the park are thought to be from within the Collie Shire, whilst visitor surveys indicate that most visitors to the proposed National Park are from the metropolitan area and regional population centres. Approximately 115 000 to 145 000 people visit the park on an annual basis.

The planning area is also located in the Western Australian Tourism Commission's South-west Region, and as well as containing the Wellington Forest Centre, the King Jarrah Tree and a section of the Bibbulmun Track, it also has links to the Ferguson and Preston Valleys. Furthermore, it is situated near the main travel route to the south-west of the state from Perth, adding to its tourism potential. Given its location, attractions and existing tourist infrastructure, an expected population growth rate of 2% in the south-west of the state, and an increase in nature based recreation and tourism activities, human pressures on the environment will need to be carefully considered in the management of the area.

Management Plan Area and Land Tenure

The planning area includes the existing Wellington National Park, proposed national park additions and the proposed Mungalup and Westralia Conservation Parks.

The existing Wellington National Park is an 'A' class reserve that currently encompasses an area of 3 045 hectares. It is surrounded by 28 012 ha of State forest, forest conservation zones, conservation parks, proposed conservation parks, and Crown reserves. It also surrounds the Wellington Reservoir, which is a water body with no tenure. Approximately 600 ha of land between the water body and the high water mark is in the process of being purchased by the Department from the Waters and Rivers Commission for addition to Wellington National Park. This will provide the Department with management authority for land down to water line.

The proposed national park additions follow a recent decision by Cabinet to increase the area of the existing national park sixfold, to over 17 500 hectares, by adding the Lennard, Davis and Gervasse blocks, part of the Lowden Block, and 70 hectares of an unnamed forest block adjacent to the western side of the Wellington Reservoir to the national park estate. The Cabinet decision was based on an assessment by an independent consultant using the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system criteria.

Cabinet's endorsement of the decision to increase the area of the national park was subject to (a) the agreement of Alcoa, who hold a State Agreement Act mining lease in respect of the north-eastern portion of the Gervasse block (which has subsequently been granted) and (b) the exclusion of a small mining lease within the Gervasse block from the national park, although it is to be included after mining and rehabilitation is completed.

The Advisory Committee will act as a public planning group that will provide advice to the planning team with respect to community concerns and the preparation of a draft management plan. In doing this, the Committee and the Department will also determine the best way of allowing the continued operation of the Wellington Discovery Forest as a demonstration forest. This may mean retaining a small area of State forest within the proposed national park boundary.

Managing The Natural Environment

Managing the natural environment involves careful consideration of the natural values of the area and the threats that impact on their conservation. Determining these values and threats will lead to better decision-making and the conservation of our natural resources.

Native Plants and Plant Communities

The planning area contains diverse vegetation associations that form part of the Jarrah Forest Interim Biogeographic Region. The forest is dominated by Jarrah–Marri complexes and includes important populations of fringing vegetation bordering the banks of the Collie River. Vegetation complexes within the planning area have been mapped by Mattiske and Havel (1998) as part of the Regional Forest Agreement and are as follows:

Table 1. Vegetation complexes represented in Wellington National Park

Vegetation Complex	Percentage of pre-European distribution in the planning area	Percentage of Pre European Distribution represented in reserves (including new parks) #	Area (ha) represented in the planning area	Area represented in reserves (ha) (including new parks)	Area remaining on crown land	Area remaining on private land
Collie	4.8	14	525	1 518	6 099	232
Dwellingup 1	2	15	4 075	30 350	141 660	7 357
Helena 1	18.4	34	2911	5 372	1 515	4 434
Hester	12.4	25	4018	7 938	14 469	1 299
Lowden	10.4	14	1775	2 353	443	2 012
Murray 1	4.8	36	3332	24 575	18 934	6 837

Yarragil 1	3.2	30	2531	23 739	35 315	5 957
Darling Scarp	0*	8	3	2 284	1 230	6 352
Muja	2.3	14	239	1 437	3 345	446

* Less than 1%

The area of Pre European vegetation is based on data layers developed for the Regional Forest Agreement 1999

The data presented in Table 1 is current for May 2002 and may change with the input of more current information. It highlights the reservation of key areas such as the Lowden and Helena vegetation complexes, which occur in parts of the Gervasse, Lennard, Davis and Lowden blocks. The inclusion of the Lowden complex is particularly significant, as its reservation within the park comprises 10.4% of the 14% of Pre European distribution represented in reserves. Pre European distribution refers to the distribution prior to 1750 and is inferred using current distribution on cleared land, using extrapolated interpretation of cleared land and using information from soil and landform systems.

The planning area also contains the former Systems Six Lennard and Westralia Management Priority Areas (Department of Conservation and Environment 1983). The former has been nominated for National Estate Listing because of its flora, fauna and landscape values. This area falls within the boundaries of the proposed national park additions and is currently listed in the National Estate database as 'indicative'. The Lennard Management Priority Area comprises Yarri (*Eucalyptus patens*), Jarrah (*E. marginata*) and Marri (*E. calophylla*) forests and contains uncommon and poorly represented vegetation associations in excellent condition. An outstanding feature of this area is the good representation of Yarri, Peppermint (*Agonis flexuosa*) and River Banksia (*Banksia seminuda*) whose occurrence elsewhere has been eliminated or reduced by the damming of rivers, agricultural clearing and pine plantations (Department of Conservation and Environment 1983). This makes these sites valuable from a conservation perspective and highly suitable as benchmarks for scientific study.

The Westralia Management Priority Area, is located in the Proposed Westralia Conservation Park. It contains poorly represented vegetation types and unusual plant species that appear out of their natural range. It also contains small but significant areas of Jarrah, Yarri and Marri forest types. Most of these ecological/landform types have been cleared for agriculture or they have been, and will continue to be logged for timber production.

The northern portion of the Westralia Management Priority Area also comprises of an important sandy area containing Holly-leafed Banksia (*Banksia ilicifolia*) and Woody Pear (*Xylomelum angustifolium*), species which are rare elsewhere on the Darling Plateau and under-represented in the present conservation reserve system (Department of Conservation and Environment 1983).

Threats to the floristic values of the planning area,, such as dieback, environmental weeds and increased erosion, are exacerbated by human activity in the area.

Native Animals and Habitats

The planning area has not been comprehensively surveyed for fauna, and as such, their ecological values are not fully known. A recent assessment of the former moratorium areas surrounding the existing national park concluded that most of the rare, threatened, or vulnerable mammal species of the south-west forest region are widely distributed (URS Environmental and Engineering Professional Services 2001). However, conservation reserves such as the Wellington National Park and proposed extensions increase the protected area of habitats and populations of many fauna species such as the Chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*) that have been under threat due to the widescale clearing for agriculture and the presence of introduced predators such as the fox and cat.

Species and Communities of Conservation Significance

The planning area contains several priority plant species and provides an area of vital habitat for many fauna species of conservation significance.

Wellington National Park contains five species of priority flora. Of these species, there is one Priority 1 species[1], two Priority 3 species and two Priority 4 species.

Wellington National Park also supports 13 fauna species of high significance. Seven are threatened species declared to be specially protected under the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*, including five that are threatened species:

- Chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*);
- Quokka (*Setonix brachyurus*),
- Western Ringtail Possum (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*),
- Baudin's Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus baudinii*); and
- Carnaby's Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus latirostris*).

A further six are priority species found in the area. Current management of the mammal species listed includes 1080 fox baiting under the Western Shield Program.

Some species, such as the Woylie (*Bettongia penicillata*), have also been re-introduced to the area. Translocations of Woylies from Batalling State Forest occurred in June and July 2000. This action was supported by the Woylie Recovery Plan (Start *et al.* 1995).

Environmental Weeds

Environmental weeds are an ever-present threat to the conservational values of the planning area with 20 species recorded. Of particular significance is the infiltration of wildlings of Monterey Pine (*Pinus radiata*) into nearby State forest and national park. Other environmental weeds of concern are Cotton Bush (*Ptilotus obovatus*), Bridal Creeper (*Asparagus asparagoides)*, Blackberry *(Rubus fruticosus),* Wild Lavender (*Lavandula dentata*) and Arum Lily (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*). Many of these weeds have been introduced into the planning area via the Collie River, adjoining private property, public roads or other areas of public use.

Consideration needs to be given towards liaising with adjacent landowners regarding integrated weed management. Populations of Watsonia *(Watsonia marginata)* and Tagasaste (*Chamaecytisus proliferus*) within the planning area have originated from adjoining agricultural land or travelled down watercourses. Watsonia is also becoming a concern in the upper reaches of the proposed Westralia Conservation Park.

The major 'declared' weed of particular concern in the Wellington National Park is Apple of Sodom *(Solanum hermannii)* and St John's Wort *(Hypericum perforatum)*. Under the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976* the Department is required to eradicate, control or contain declared weeds on land it manages.

There are programs in place for weed and feral animal control to minimise any impact on non-target species.

Problem Animals

The planning area faces many threats from feral animals and insect pests. Feral animals such as the Cat (*Felis catus*), Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) and Pig (*Sus scrofa*) are prevalent in the area and cause widespread environmental problems (Dames and Moore 1987). Pigs are a major threat to the park as they harbour disease, cause erosion and destroy vital habitats, particularly those in riparian zones. Foxes predate on native fauna and have contributed to the widespread decline of critical weight range mammals (0.35-8 kg) across Australia. The Department's Western Shield Program involves the control of feral predators and translocations of significant fauna (eg. Chuditch and Woylie) to fox-controlled areas within their former range.

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[1] Priority One – Poorly known taxa: Taxa which are known from one or a few (generally <5) populations which are under threat;
Priority Three – Poorly known taxa: Taxa which are known from several populations, and the taxa are not believed to be under immediate threat.
Priority Four – Taxa which are considered to have been adequately surveyed and which, whilst being rare (in Australia), are not currently threatened by an identifiable factors.

Diseases

The major plant disease of concern in the planning area is dieback, which is caused by the introduced soil-borne fungus *Phytopthora cinnamomi* (Dames and Moore 1987). With salinity, this disease is the most serious ecological problem in south-western Australia and is fatal to many native plant communities on lateritic or poorly drained soils. The disease cannot be eradicated once it is established at a site. Therefore control measures concentrate on preventing the disease from establishing or spreading. Visitor access and the type of recreational activities within the park must be carefully managed. Current dieback management is guided by a series of Departmental manuals.

Soil and Catchment Protection

Protection of the Wellington catchment is a key area of concern as the Dam water is being viewed as a potential drinking water source. Currently the Wellington Dam is used for irrigation supply and is not suitable as a drinking water supply because the health risks associated with the existing poor quality water. This is due to activities on and around the Dam, and within the catchment. The major influence on water quality is high salinity levels due to dryland salinity caused by extensive land clearing in the upper catchment.

The Collie River, which feeds the Wellington Dam, is designated as a recovery catchment and it is expected that salinity will reduce to a potable level within 10 years (Water and Rivers Commission 2001). Once the water in Wellington Dam becomes potable, there is likely to be trading between irrigation water allocations and drinking water allocations, with an expected demand for 12 to 25 million kilolitres of drinking water for local consumption, for the Great Southern Towns Water Supply or for Perth. Water allocations are determined by the Waters and Rivers Commission, a process currently underway for Wellington Dam.

Management of water quality is part of water source protection planning, carried out by the Waters and Rivers Commission. For the Wellington Dam this source protection planning will be run concurrently with the park management planning process.

One method of maximising water quality is to protect the catchment by changing the activities permitted on and around the water body. In particular, recreational activities surrounding the Wellington Dam reservoir are expected to be modified in some way by the Waters and Rivers Commission, which will almost inevitably lead to some conflict with the community (even though the community are consulted as part of the water source protection planning process). This has already been the stimulus for two, heated community meetings and correspondence.

Fire

Fire is a natural disturbance factor of the vegetation complexes within the planning area, and together with climate and geomorphology, has operated over many millions of years to shape the biodiversity of the forested and non-forested ecosystems in this area.

Fire is a fundamental tool required in the maintenance of the biodiversity of the forest ecosystems and ecological processes upon which it depends, whilst providing a sufficient level of protection from wildfires to fire sensitive ecosystems and to societal values.

Setting clear fire management objectives for the conservation of biodiversity and for the protection of values is fundamental in the development of fire management plans and standards, and in determining strategies and tactics.

The best available knowledge on fire effects and fire interactions within the various components of the ecosystems in south-west forest will be compiled, analysed and applied to develop these fire management strategies and tactics.

Current knowledge indicates that in order to optimise and protect biodiversity, fire regimes need to be applied that provide for an interlocking mosaic of patches of vegetation and habitats that represent a range of fire frequencies, fire intervals, seasons, intensities and scales.

These ecologically based fire regimes will need to take into account the requirement to provide an adequate level of protection to both conservation and societal values. This will be achieved through a systematic and structured Wildfire Threat Analysis and risk management.

The key assets to be considered for protection in the development of the fire management plan include the Collie townsite; the Wellington Dam recreation sites, and surrounding pine plantations; Honeymoon Pool Recreation sites, neighbouring farmlands; and visitors within the National Park.

The fire management plan will need to adopt any new knowledge gained through research, monitoring and operational experience.

Managing Cultural Heritage

Indigenous Heritage

The Collie River dissects the Wellington National Park, and is regarded by local Noongar people to be a symbol of life. Legend says that the Waggyl or Rainbow Serpent came down from the hills to make the Collie River and that his enormous body turned to form the Leschenault Inlet before returning up the river to Minninup Pool where his spirit rests today. The area is considered to be rich in Noongar culture and its importance for traditionally linked contemporary cultural activities is recognised. Whilst the existing national park does not currently contain registered sites, it is probable that many sites exist. The planning area is also covered by one native title claim.

The Government has also shown a commitment to joint management arrangements with traditional owners. Cabinet is currently considering an issues paper presented by the Department as to how these joint management arrangements may work. Traditionally linked contemporary cultural activities such as hunting (which is currently going on within the planning area on State forest) will need to be carefully considered to ensure public safety requirements and sustainability issues can best be met.

Managing Visitors

Visitor Access

Road access to and within Wellington National Park is already well developed with major visitor nodes such as the Dam, kiosk and Potters Gorge all accessible via sealed roads. Unsealed roads such as Lennard Drive and Falcon, River and Pile Roads also provide good access to popular areas such as Honeymoon Pool. However, increased traffic volumes and visitor access in areas such as the Lennard State Forest (proposed as national park) are causing significant erosion. Co-operative work between the Department and four-wheel drive clubs has lead to rehabilitation of some of the eroded tracks and reinforcement of other tracks to provide a more sustainable four-wheel drive experience. Consideration will be given to the environmental impacts of four wheel driving and to setting aside sustainable tracks for usage. Further investigation is also needed regarding the possibility of including a four-wheel drive trails network with interpretation of forest features.

There are opportunities to improve existing trail networks and provide a greater range of experiences. The latter includes the increasing demand for cycling trails. However, trail user groups such as walkers and mountain bikers often conflict, and consideration will be given to cater for these groups with separate facilities or with trails specifically designed for dual use. Alternative locations outside the national Park will also be considered with the view of establishing trail networks throughout the south-west.

Visitor Use and Opportunities

Visitor use is the most contentious management issue within the planning area, specifically the catchment area above the Dam where there is conflict between the community's recreational aspirations and the supply of potable drinking water as the intended uses for Wellington Dam. According to the Waters and Rivers Commission and Water Corporation, recreation in this area may adversely affect the water quality of Wellington Dam.

At the present, Wellington National Park is a popular visitor destination offering a wide range of activities and experiences such as bushwalking, swimming, marron and trout fishing, sailing, rowing, camping, canoeing, mountain biking, sightseeing, four wheel and scenic driving (Department of Conservation and Land Management 1999). These activities are primarily located below the Dam on the lower Collie River where most of the infrastructure is in place.

Sailing and rowing are the only activities confined to the Dam, with all other water-based activities also occurring on the river below the Dam. There is also demand for white water rafting, with water released in pulses from Wellington Dam.

Opportunities for land-based activities are provided downstream of the dam. In addition to this, the Bibbulmun Track also traverses the Westralia Conservation Park. Remnants of the former alignment of this track remain inside the national park and proposed extensions and are now being upgraded.

However, recreation opportunities surrounding Wellington Dam may be diminished if access is restricted to minimise the risk of contamination of the drinking water source, an issue of great community concern. The Waters and Rivers Commission and the Water Corporation may impose restrictions on the type and degree of recreational usage, and are currently examining options in preparing a Water Source Protection Plan for the Wellington Catchment. Both organisations are part of the Wellington National Park Community Advisory Committee and are pursuing their special interest in the issue of restricted recreational use through this committee. The Department continues to provide input into the plan and will integrate water quality management into the Wellington National Park Management Plan where appropriate. However, the Department has made it clear to the public and other stakeholders that the responsibility for such decisions ultimately lies with the Water and Rivers Commission. Whatever the outcome, management in the future will need to consider the integration of water resource protection with the maintenance of visitor experiences and access. Management will also need to consider conflict that may arise between different visitor groups in the park.

Tourism

There is scope for accommodation options within the Park to cater for a range of visitors. One option is the Potters Gorge accommodation project, which involves the construction of a chalet-style resort on the shores of the Wellington Dam. This has the potential to provide a major recreational opportunity currently unavailable—that of a developed recreation site with activities including day use areas, vehicle-based camping, walk-in camping, caravan and cabin-based accommodation with the possibility of a coffer dam across an arm of the reservoir. The latter would enable a permanent recreational water body to be maintained that is unaffected by water level fluctuations. The area proposed for the resort is also large and offers good access via the sealed Tom Jones Drive. Local Shires and tourist bureaus are strongly supportive of this concept but it has met opposition from voluntary conservation groups. The development within the catchment will also depend on the outcome of the Water Source Protection Plan being prepared by the Waters and Rivers Commission and the Water Corporation.

Involving The Community

Information, Education and Interpretation

There is scope for developing further interpretation opportunities in the Wellington National Park. Interpretation within the area will be enhanced following Cabinet's decision to endorse the continuation of the Wellington Discovery Forest. This is used as an education centre for forest education and interpretation. The development of an interpretation plan will be considered during the planning process.

Interpretation facilities at the Discovery Forest and the dam/kiosk area are well developed and provide good facilities for the visitor. The Wellington Discovery Forest offers guided educational activities for schools and other groups. These programs are increasingly popular with local and regional schools, TAFE colleges and universities. A number of interpretative walking trails with trailside signs explain aspects of forest ecology, cultural history, engineering and

forest/park management. There is a scope for the continued development of guided interpretive activities in this area and throughout the park. Information shelters located at Potter's Gorge, Honeymoon Pool and King Jarrah Tree are being upgraded this year as part of the 'Protecting Old Growth Forests' funding program.

Working with the Community

Community involvement is an important issue in preparing the Wellington National Park Management Plan. Public concern over issues such as land tenure, visitor use and water management is high. To facilitate this involvement, an advisory committee, known as the Wellington National Park Community Advisory Committee has been established.

There is also a need to work in conjunction with the Waters and Rivers Commission and the Water Corporation to ascertain the public's viewpoint towards visitor access and water protection issues concerning the future use of Wellington Dam.

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