

THE WILD COUNTRY

by R. J. Underwood

The coast between Walpole and Augusta is perhaps the last true wilderness area in the south west of Western Australia. It is remote, wild and beautiful country, difficult of access and scarcely touched by the hand of man. "The Coast", as it has been reverently known by at least three generations of local settlers and forestry men, is a mecca for fishermen, campers and those who merely love the adventure and the romance of the wild country.

As a young graduate, I first came to know and love the coast several years ago when I spent three months on the second stage of the Northcliffe-Walpole F. A. R. G. Road across the South Northcliffe flats to the Gardner River. The road construction crew consisted of a D7 and driver, myself and my dog. This was before the recent upsurge of privately owned 4-wheel drive vehicles and the only other people we ever saw were the coastal-lease cockeys and occasional groups of mill hands or farmers who either came through on beaten-up old tractors or on foot down the banks of the Gardner. Their rations for a trip to the coast seemed to consist in the main of large plastic containers of plonk and their life-support system was the marron net, the beach fishing rod and the frying pan.

This was a period of rare adventure and discovery for me. There were trips to Fish Creek, with the beautiful peppermint and grass woodlands and the conical and bread-loaf shaped sand hills; Coodamurrup Beach with the old lease fences climbing up the sand drifts half-buried and stark; Lake Maringup, a glorious stretch of water tasting as sweet as lemonade, with flights of ducks and peppermint and yate stands growing to the lake's edge. Further west up the coast there is the Doggerup, Malimup Springs, the Meerup, the Warren Beach and the mighty Yeagarup Dunes. Beautiful names for beautiful country.

Coming back to within striking distance of this area in 1968, the lure of the coast was still there. The coast is easier to get at now, but still not easy enough to allow the casual visitor or city tourist. Windy Harbour and Salmon Beach are perhaps the only places into which one can drive with a two-wheel drive conventional vehicle. There is that masterpiece of road engineering, the "Sleeper Track", down to the mouth of the Warren, but even here one is faced with a two mile walk into the beach over unconsolidated sand hills about 800 feet high. The real attraction of the coast is, I suppose, that it has changed so little since the days of earliest settlement.

These areas are still used as coastal Cattle Leases as they have been for the last century, and one can still encounter a drover with his horse, dog and mob of cattle coming down from West Pemberton or East Manjimup. Standing on Calcup Hill, with the wind at your back and the smell of the ocean and the beach spinifex, you could as easily imagine you are in the year 1890 as 1970. The only blight on the horizon is the distant vista of the thousands upon thousands of ringbarked karri stags on the west Northcliffe Group Settlement blocks. Monuments indeed to the hand of man and his ill-inspired aspirations for progress and development.

But there are other signs of the intrusion of man. Foremost among these is the presence of marram grass throughout the coastal dune belts from the Donnelly River down to Malimup. The story of the fixation of the great dunes has already been told (See Perry and Weston, "Some Notes on Coastal Sand Dune Fixation in Western Australia", a paper prepared for the A. F. C. in 1949), but it is still fascinating to browse through the old files in the Pemberton office and piece together this early work. Sand Dune Reclamation was a function of the Forests Department until 1959, when the work was taken over by the Conservation Service of the Agriculture Department. Early work in this area was on the stabilization of the rapidly moving dunes near the mouth of the Warren River, the Calcup Dune encroaching on location 2417 ("The Colonels") and the Yeagarup Dunes, the faces of which were recorded as moving at rates of up to 3 chains per ~~year~~^{year} into useful karri and jarrah stands. Numerous officers were associated with this work over the years, but Dick Perry in the 1930's seemed to be closer to the initial work than anyone else. His first report on our file, after a trip to the Dunes in the winter of 1936 makes good reading. Using a Mr. W. Brockman Jnr. as a guide and travelling by horseback, Dick reported that he managed to inspect most of the drifts between the mouths of the Warren and Donnelly Rivers. "Inclement weather restricted inspection somewhat", he reported. A nice piece of understatement, that. The scrub in this area is practically impenetrable and is interspersed with swamps, quicksands, lagoons and watercourses. It must have been a pleasant winter's hike.

Later in the file one reads of the establishment of plots of pines in and around the dune country. Ernie Percival put in six plots of *Pinus halepensis* on the Yeagarup Dunes in 1953 and John Meachem planted pinaster on the Calcup Dune in 1956. Ernie and I have recently attempted to locate these plots and those that were not engulfed by moving sand have done quite well. One plot of *halepensis*, planted into Marram grass on a moving dune now carries a small stand of 20 foot trees. Their colour is good, but they are badly malformed by the wind and sand. The dune is now completely stable and is thickly covered with native scrub species. The pinaster on Calcup Dune have done even better, having good form, height and

diameter growth. Steve Quain estimates them to be equal to S. Q. III Stands at Gnangara.

Last winter another pinaster trial plot was planted on the Yeagarup Dunes. About 10 acres of pines were put in on a long transect across the moving face of the dune. The transect took in the whole range of sand dune sites from stabilized dune to open drift. Unfortunately the planting stock was exceedingly poor, seedlings being only about 1½" to 2" tall. Nevertheless the trial is already showing interesting results. As expected the survival rate on the unconsolidated sand is negligible, but in the hollows and on the scrubby dunes, the plants are not only surviving but have made an inch or two of spring growth. It is apparent that deep planting is of great importance in these sandy sites.

A further small trial will be made next winter on the windward side of the dunes. In winter, the dunes can be crossed quite readily by landrover or on the D. F. O. 's motorbike! An attempt will be made to establish marram grass and pines in alternate rows across the drifts. It is hoped that better seedling stock will be available and that the summer following planting will be a little more favourable than this one.

There are over 30 square miles of sand dunes along the coastal strip of the Pemberton Division. It is likely that some well conducted planting trials now may be of immense value when a planting programme gets under way down here in the next few years.

In the meantime, what better excuse for a trip down to the dunes - the last of the wild country of the Southwest Coast.