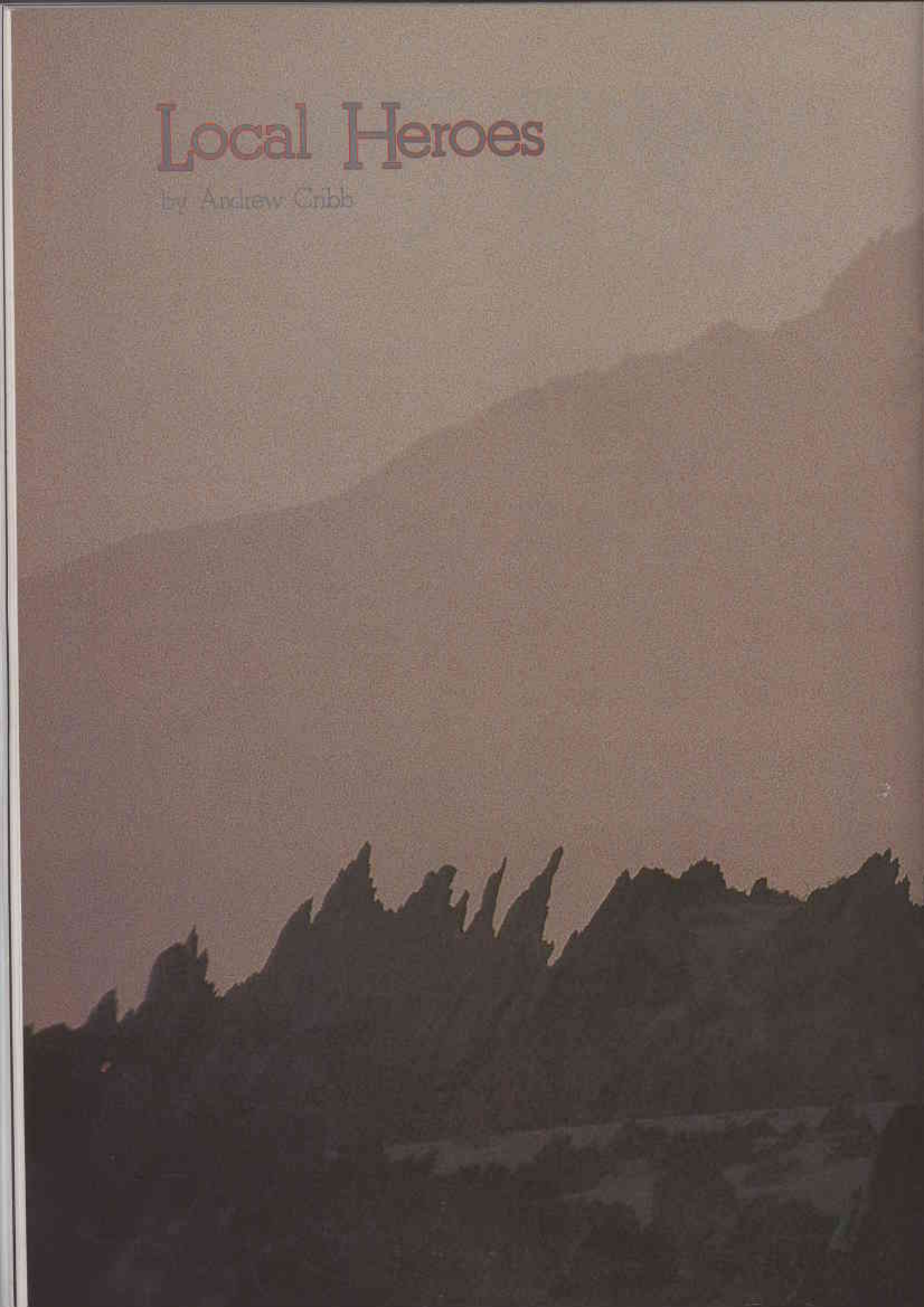
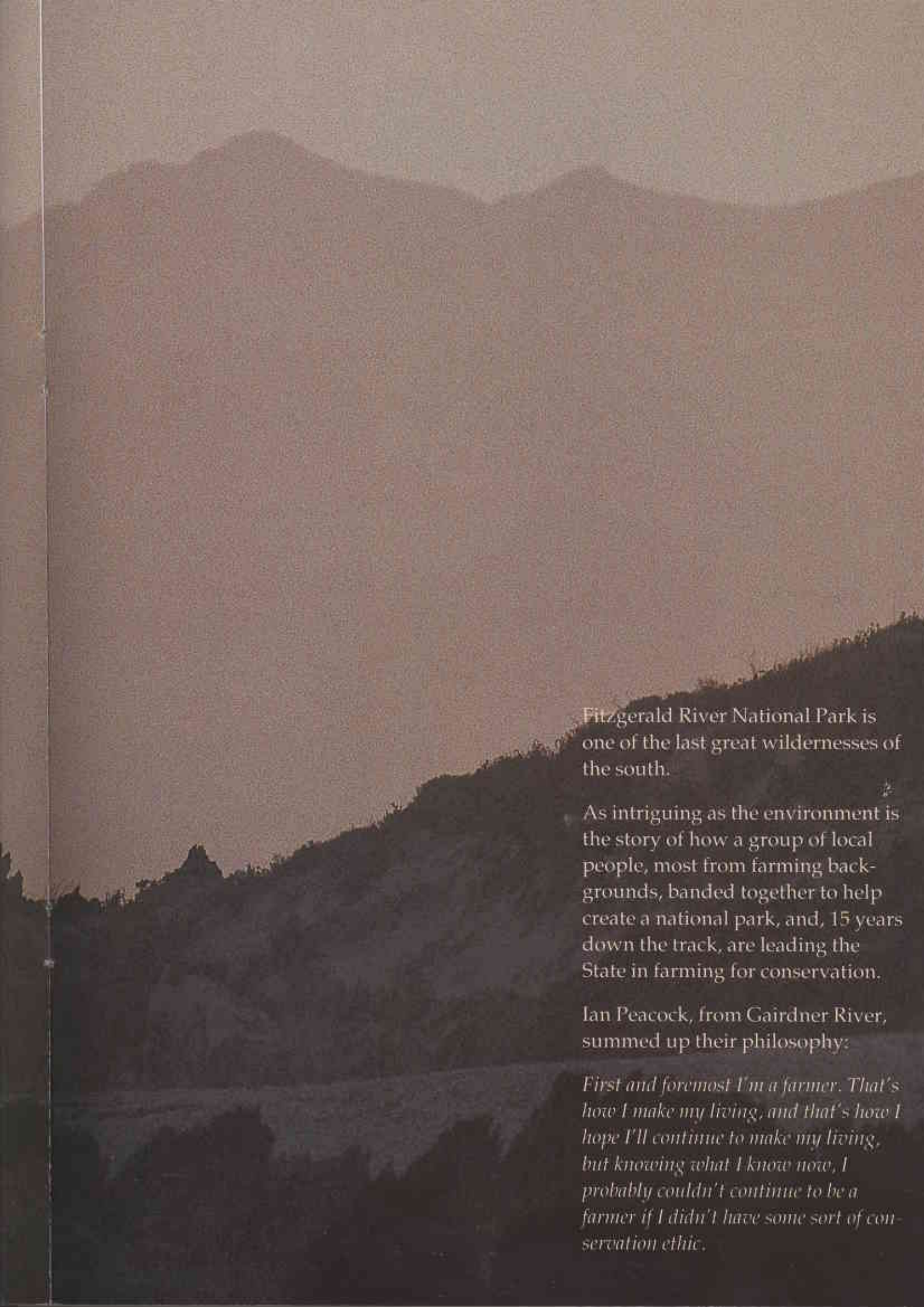
Local Heroes

by Andrew Cribb





Fitzgerald River National Park is one of the last great wildernesses of the south.

As intriguing as the environment is the story of how a group of local people, most from farming backgrounds, banded together to help create a national park, and, 15 years down the track, are leading the State in farming for conservation.

Ian Peacock, from Gairdner River, summed up their philosophy:

First and foremost I'm a farmer. That's how I make my living, and that's how I hope I'll continue to make my living, but knowing what I know now, I probably couldn't continue to be a farmer if I didn't have some sort of conservation ethic.

Before 1950 the Fitzgerald River National Park was vacant Crown Land, just another part of the seemingly endless bush that confronted trans-national explorers and adventurous pastoralists in the last century. But the purchase of the extensive Hassell property in that year, with its rambling homestead at 'Old Jerramungup', marked the start of a revolution in farm development, which was to to define the boundaries of the Park.

In the period 1954-60, under the War Service Land Settlement Scheme, 141 farms were developed to west of the Gairdner River, and allocated to ex-servicemen. In just six years the bulldozer had prepared land for vermin proof fencing around 181 000 ha, and chains and fire had prepared 100 000 ha for pasture.

From 1961 a second wave of settlers occupied Conditional Purchase Scheme blocks to the south-east of the new Jerramungup townsite, and well inland from the rugged country which is now the Fitzgerald River National Park.

Few of these people had farming experience, and not all were of English descent. Such was the diversity of the Park's neighbours; but after 20 years only four of the original 28 families have remained on their blocks.

C.A. Gardner, the Government Botanist during the '50 s, was the first to become enthusiastic about the wealth of flora in the unalienated areas. He succeeded in having the Fitzgerald gazetted a 'C' class reserve for the protection of flora and fauna. This far-sighted move meant that clearing for agriculture was averted temporarily. Nevertheless, the purpose and boundaries of the reserve could still be changed without reference to Parliament.

The 1950s and '60s had been a boom period in agriculture, but this came to a sudden end in 1969. Wheat quotas were introduced, rainfall was half its annual average and wool prices plummeted a year later. The push for new land development evaporated overnight.

Meanwhile, a mining boom had taken over and speculative pegging was at its height in W.A. The Mining Act, first passed in 1904, and little changed since, provided no control on mining in national parks or reserves. The Fitzgerald Flora and Fauna Reserve was first pegged for minerals in April 1970, and more speculative claims followed, eventually covering 11.5 per cent of the reserve.

The mining proposed would have removed two quartzite mountains for glass manufacture, and spongolite cliffs for building stone, abrasives and kaolin clay. Under the spongolite are thin beds of low quality brown coal, at the time believed to contain large quantities of high grade montan wax.

In 1970, amendments to the Mining Act gave the Minister for Mines the power to prevent mining in national parks and flora and fauna reserves in the south-west land division of W.A. The mineral claims for montan wax, pegged by a small Perth-based company, Jupiter Minerals NL, and covering 19 200 ha, became the test case for the amended law.

Looking west from Pt. Anne.

Cliff Winfield

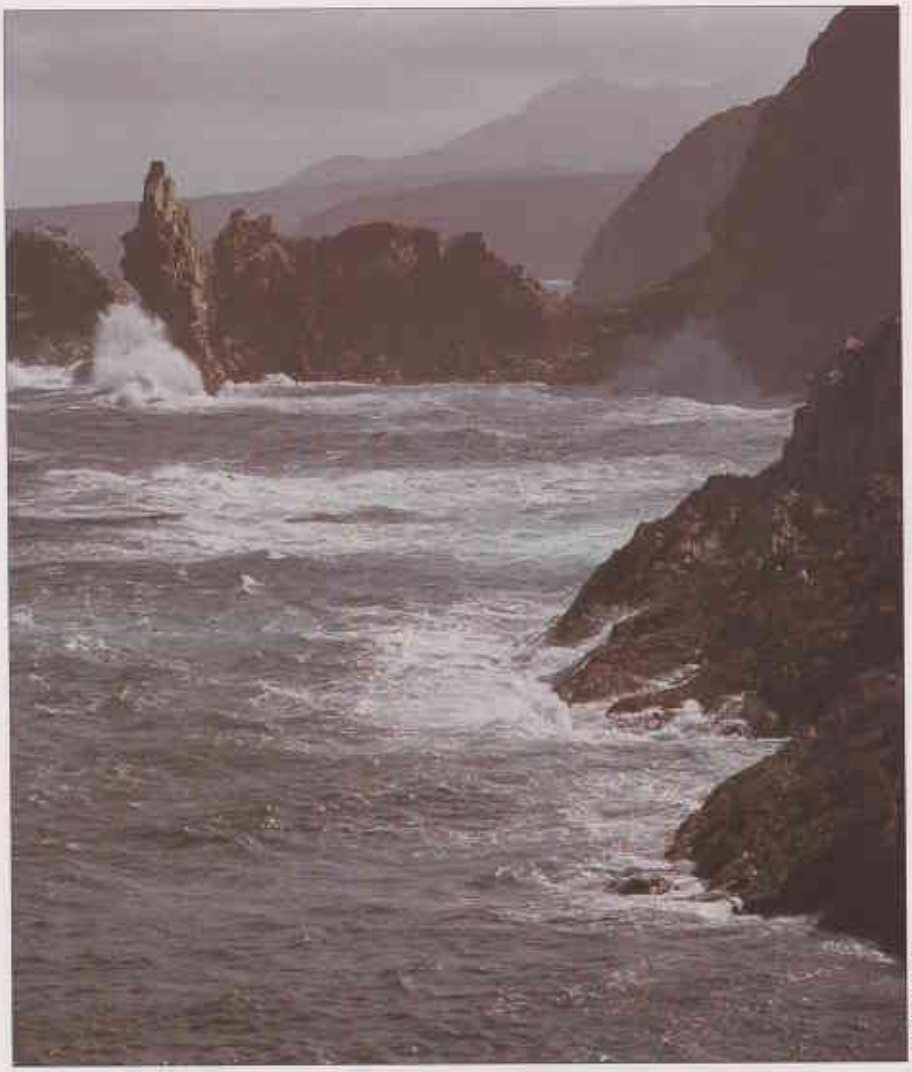
Mike Marcombe

The mine at Twertup (Top).

Patterns in the sand (right).

The spongolite cliffs which attracted mining interests (below).

Mike Marcombe



Mike Marcombe

Cliff Winfield

Nodding banksia (above)

The wild south coast (left and below).

Jim Lochman

People Power

Objections to the claim were lodged before the Mining Act Inquiry by a variety of Government and conservation organisations, and a one month adjournment was granted so that field studies could be carried out. Unfortunately for the objectors, the areas under claim had been burnt by wildfire 17 months before and results from the field studies were disappointing.

A locally-based lobby group helped swing the balance. The Ongerup Conservation Organisation (OCO), set up by farmers and amateur botanists days after the adjournment, developed an information campaign to answer the claims of the mining company.

OCO's first act was to organize a petition against exploration and mining on conservation and recreation reserves. In less than two weeks 745 signatures from the local community were obtained, and the petition was submitted to the Minister for Mines two days before the hearing was due to resume.

Local opinion was divided as to the value of the mining. Some thought the area useless, and a haven for vermin, others were totally uninterested. The continuing droughts since 1969 added weight to the mining companies claims of increased local employment and cartage contracts let to local farmers. But the petition was seen as evidence enough that the majority of the community considered the reserve sufficiently valuable to be worth protecting.

When the mining issue became more widely known more people wished to donate money, but were reluctant to contribute to OCO as there was no certainty that the funds would be used only on the mining issue.

As a result the Fitzgerald National Park Association was formed. Its main aims were to press for upgrading the Fitzgerald Flora and Fauna Reserve to 'A' class status, to oppose any incompatible development, to carry out surveys and extend knowledge of the area's biology, educate the public on the value of national parks, and, on a more down-to-earth level, to clean up litter in the park and assist with management.

Toward the end of 1971 the incoming Labor Government announced that the contested claims would be taken out of the Mining Warden's court. A new Act establishing the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) was to be proclaimed. The first task of the new authority would be to resolve the mineral claims.

On the 2nd February, 1972, following further submissions from OCO, the Minister for Mines, members of the newly formed EPA, and Departmental officers inspected the Fitzgerald Flora and Fauna Reserve. As a result the reserve was granted 'A' class status and placed under the control of the National Parks Authority.The Geological Survey was asked to drill the mineral claims to assess the montan wax deposits, and the results indicated 1.1 million tonnes of lignite averaging 2.3 per cent montan wax, as opposed to the original speculation by Jupiter Minerals of 40 million tonnes containing 6 per cent wax.

The Environment Protection Council, making its recommendations to the EPA, carried the following resolution:

'That this Council recommends that in view of:

1) the small size and low grade of the montan wax deposits at Fitzgerald River indicated by the exploration and analysis undertaken by the Mines Department; and

2) the considerable scientific and tourist value of the Fitzgerald River Reserve

the current application by Jupiter Minerals NL for coal prospecting areas in the reserve, should be refused ... and no future applications with respect to the lignite deposits be granted.'

The recommendation was supported by the EPA, and endorsed by Cabinet.

FRIENDS OF THE FITZGERALD

From its inception as a lobby group the Fitzgerald National Park Association has gone from strength to strength.

After a period of inactivity following the dedication of the Fitzgerald as a national park the association was reformed in March 1980 as the Fitzgerald River National Park Association.

Among the first of its activities was the restoration of a house built near a spongolite quarry at Twertup as a centre for the Association. The building was opened in December 1981 as the Twertup Field Study Centre, and is available to anyone wishing to study in the Park.

A program to monitor nutrient and salt levels in the Park's rivers with regard to the effect of increasing salinity and nutrient discharge from surrounding farmlands has been established with the help of a federal grant.

A herbarium has been established at the Field Study Centre, submissions against further mining proposals prepared, and educational walktrails which interpret aspects of the environment for visitors developed. Tireless lobbying has finally resulted in a detailed biological survey of the Park by Association members, with the assistance of a grant from the W.A. Government, and advice and materials from CALM.

A national park consists of many things: plants, animals, breathtaking vistas, intricate ecosystems; but perhaps the most important element is people. After all, without the local heroes Fitzgerald River National Park would not exist.

BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES

What happens on the borders of a national park can be as important to its long-term viability as what happens inside.

The prospect for further land release for farming, including vacant Crown Land immediately north of the Fitzgerald River National Park, became a controversial issue in the period 1979-83 . Better economic times and a Government sponsored review in 1979, had led to a policy of opening up 50 new farms a year. A well organised conservation lobby, based at Ravensthorpe and Mt Barker, combined with scientists to oppose the decision. A 'land release' seminar to debate the issue was organised and held, fortuitously, in March 1983. The Minister for Agriculture for the newly elected Labor Government announced a moratorium on land release, pending a review by a Cabinet sub-committee.

Earlier in 1987, 51 000 ha of the adjacent Crown Land was nominated for addition to the Park, and the Bill for its gazettal is expected to appear before the autumn or spring sitting of Parliament.

Meanwhile, poor climatic conditions have persisted, resulting in occasional severe instances of wind erosion on farms. But, a more sinister threat is the rising ground water table in farming areas following the replacement of perennial and deeper-rooted woodland species with shallow-rooted, annual cereal crops and pastures.

Like many other places in W.A. Jerramungup soils contain the salty residue of millions of years of saline rain and high evaporation rates in a saline layer below the topsoil, but above the groundwater table. If the groundwater rises, the salt begins to redissolve.

In the catchment of the Gairdner River, just north of Bremer Bay, there is estimated to be 2 400 tonnes of salt per hectare of agricultural land.

Salt sumps in low-lying areas, and increasing salinity in patches of cultivated land are signs that the groundwater is rising.

The Soil Conservation Committees of the Jerramungup and Ravensthorpe Soil Conservation Districts began work in 1983. The Committees consist mainly of local farmers who, with advice from the Agriculture Department and CALM, put great emphasis on conservation as good farming practice. These two Soil Conservation Districts completely surround the National Park.

Many rehabilitation projects are underway. The farmers also monitor the salinity levels on their own properties, which can be both expensive and time-consuming.

In 1983 the Gairdner Catchment Study Group was founded by Ian Peacock, the farmer quoted at the beginning of this article. This group of farmers, who farm the land on one of the catchments which drains via the Gairdner River into the National Park, began a salt monitoring project on their properties. Funded as a National Soil Conservation Project, they sank 33 bores to monitor the groundwater in the catchment.

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE FITZGERALD?

Fitzgerald River National Park covers nearly 243 000 ha, and a range of plant communities and animal habitats as varied and startling as they are delicate.

Of approximately 4 000 species of native plants found in south-west Australia, 1 232 have been recorded in the Fitzgerald River National Park. Fifty-eight of these are endemic to the Park, and another 38 are almost confined to the Park.

Species known to occur in the Park, and nowhere else include the extraordinary royal hakea, and the graceful weeping gum.

About forty million years ago the sea-level rose 130 m above its level today, drowning the coastal plain through which the saline rivers of the Fitzgerald run. Small hills and ridges on the plain were flattened out, and gullies filled with sponge spicules and clays, which gradually became a soft rock called spongolite.

Fifty metres above the present coastline ocean waves cut a platform into the uplands, and around the partially submerged Barren Ranges. As the sea level fell again the rivers draining the hinterlands cut deeply into the soft spongolite of the marine plain, forming gorges between 10 and 50 m deep in the colourful rock.

The Park protects some magnificent scenery, and is large and untouched enough to provide a habitat for many species of native plants and animals fast becoming rare elsewhere.

Several endangered animal species have been discovered in the Park in recent years including the dibbler, and the Ground Parrot.

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE FITZGERALD?

Simply setting aside an area as a park or reserve is not enough to ensure its health or survival for all time. Threats to the environment must be identified and dealt with, and long-term management goals must be agreed to and implemented.

Now that the possibility of this beautiful area being mined or cleared for agriculture has been averted, the main threats are likely to come from introduced plant diseases (such as dieback), frequent wildfires or uncontrolled recreational use of the Park.

All of these problems are presently being tackled by CALM staff and their friends in the local community. Very recently an advisory body has been established, and work commenced on a formal management plan.

Jiri Lochman

The common scaly-foot (Pygopodus lepidopodus) is indeed common in the Park (left).

The graceful weeping gum, Eucalyptus sepulcralis (below).

A species of Daviesia, part of the rich flora of Fitzgerald River (below left).

Little Eagle (Hieraetus morphnoides) (bottom).

Cliff Winfield

Cliff Winfield

Jiri Lochman

The project team preparing the management plan wants to hear from you. Conservation, recreation, access, fire and dieback are some of the issues being considered.

Send your information and comments to the address below before December 31st. For further information contact:

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Cover Photo

We've heard of wolves baying at the moon, but frogs? Obviously, this amphibian is not above displaying a little lunacy. Nor is the photographer, Jiri Lochman, who must have been moonstruck to get this superb shot.

EDITORIAL

Every year at this time the subject of bush fires becomes a preoccupation with land managers. Steps must be taken to ready fire-fighters and their equipment; hazards must be identified and minimised; education programs for neighbours and visitors must be renewed. Fires are inevitable. The combination of hot, dry weather, inflammable fuels in the bush and ignition from lightning or careless people will see to it that almost every day over the next few months Conservation and Land Management Staff or Bush Fire Brigades will be fighting a bush fire somewhere in the State. Because of modern technology and efficient fire control practices, land managers these days can very largely determine the fire regime which is to be applied in a given area. For example, in most of the land CALM is responsible for, the policy is to try to keep fire out, pending a better understanding of ecological requirements. In a small proportion of the CALM estate (notably parts of the south-west forests), regular, controlled burning is done. The aim of this operation is to minimise the risk of serious wildfires in places where values are highest. The most important value to be considered in the South-West is human life.

In this edition of *Landscope* readers are urged to recognise their individual responsibilities. Most importantly, these are to make their own houses safe from bush fires and to learn how to look after themselves and their families if a fire occurs.

This dual approach by land managers and householders will help combat the worst consequences of one of nature's most dangerous and predictably-occurring events: the Australian summer bushfire.

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