

*West Cape Howe, now a national park, lies on Western Australia's southern coast between Albany and Denmark. Its coastline is dominated by rocky headlands, sheer cliffs and sandy beaches. Inland, the park rises to the north, coastal heaths giving way to jarrah and sheoak and to tall karri forest at the highest point near the park entrance.*

*This new national park is all ...*

# CLIFFS, COAST AND KARRI

*by Ian Herford*

**D**ECLARED in 1985, West Cape Howe is one of Western Australia's most recent national parks. With an area of just over 3 500 hectares, the park is not large, but what it lacks in size it makes up for in scenic grandeur.

Prior to European settlement the area was used by the Minang people, who inhabited an area around Albany. Some of the older local residents can remember tribal groups travelling down the Hay River to the coast each summer. The river provided a convenient highway through the dense forest and the summer was spent on the coast with its abundant supplies of seafood. Corroborees were often held in the area. At the end of the hot season, the Aboriginal people would move inland once more.

The cleared rural landscape and ringbarked trees of Torbay, near the entrance to West Cape Howe National Park, are a vivid contrast to the shady karri forest just within the park boundary.

The tall karri forest supports a dense tall-shrub understorey of karri oak, karri hazel, karri wattle and the waterbushes. Where there is light and space, there are low shrubs of many blue-flowered species such as tree hovea, *Dampiera* and *Veronica*. Sedges and tufted plants such as *Cladium* and *Orthrosanthus multiflorus* are common on the wet, shady forest floor.



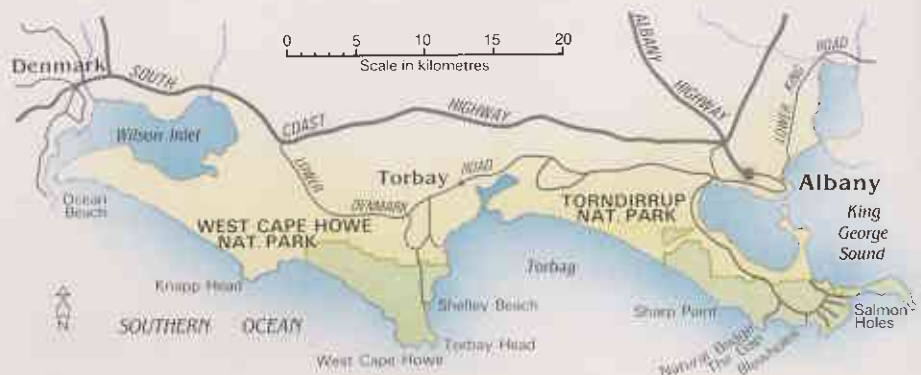
This is a regrowth forest. Logging began here last century. In 1884, Millars Timber Company built two of the first large mills in Western Australia at Torbay, just to the north, after securing a lease over 50 000 acres of forest. Karri was cut from the area to provide sleepers and timbers for the Great Southern Railway, which ran from Albany to Beverley and was built by the WA Land and Development Company, a large London concern. Timber cutting continued in the area until early this century.

Leaving the karri forest, less than a kilometre from the entrance, is just as startling as entering it. The vegetation drops to a low coastal heath within metres. Towards the coast, the landscape opens up and you can see Lake William, the largest of three freshwater lakes that are fringed with dense thickets of shrubs and sedge. A dense stand of the dark-leaved tree known as wattie (*Agonis juniperina*) mantles the lake. An unusual floating aquatic carnivore (*Utricularia*) is found on the lake itself. Albany pitcher plants are also common on the well-drained edges of Lake William. The lake

**Lake William is one of three freshwater lakes in West Cape Howe National Park.**

Photo - Martin Lloyd ▼

Photo previous page - Les Harman



was once open to the sea, but is now separated from it by a range of huge limestone hills along the coast. These hills were once coastal dunes.

As the road narrows and winds around the hills you can glimpse the ocean. To the east, the peninsula of Torndirrup National Park is abruptly terminated by Peak Head. Over the Southern Ocean lies Eclipse Island. On a clear day you can see the lighthouse built in 1926.

Up the hill is the lookout. From here you can see the clean white sand of Shelley Beach curving beneath steep limestone hills, which drop sharply into the sea. Across the water are Dunsy Beach and Torbay Head, the southernmost point in Western Australia. This point was named by English navigator George Vancouver in 1791. Vancouver also bestowed the name Cape Howe on the western headland. It was not until 1801, when Matthew Flinders sailed along this stretch of coast, that the prefix West was added to distinguish the Cape from another of the same name on the border between New South Wales and Victoria.

Fishermen often dot the beach, for West Cape Howe is renowned for its beach fishing. Salmon, herring and skippy are regular catches. Since the 1960s, a commercial fishing operation has also been based at Shelley Beach. Between February and April, you may see a small boat off the beach surrounding a pod of salmon with a net. The fish are hauled ashore, loaded into a trailer and taken to the processors by truck. Herring are also caught commercially at Shelley.

### CLIFF-HANGERS

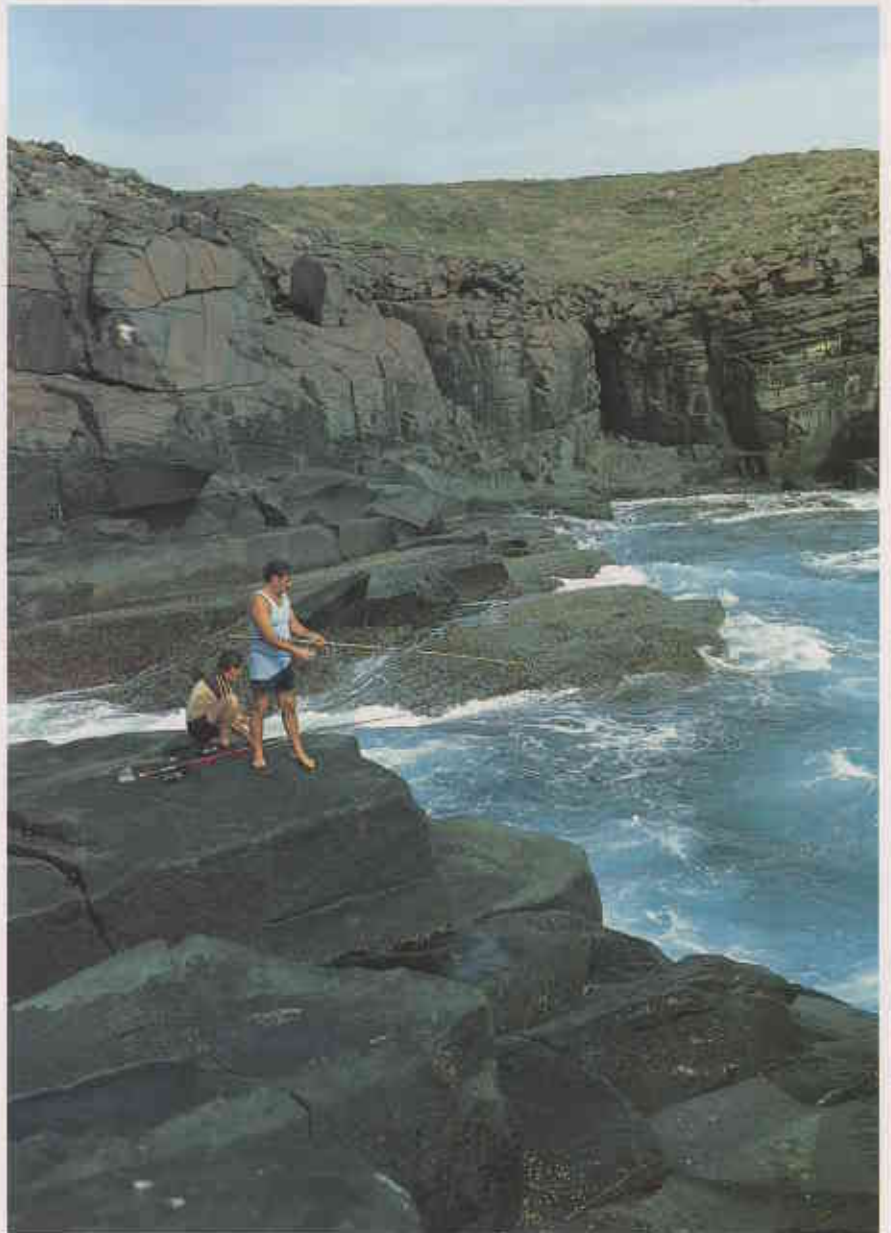
West Cape Howe is regarded as the premier hang-gliding site in Western Australia and, on long weekends and holidays, it attracts large numbers of enthusiasts from as far away as Perth.

The karri forest at the park's entrance has been regrown after it was logged last century.

Photo - Martin Lloyd ▲▲

West Cape Howe offers some of the best fishing on the South Coast.

Photo - Les Harman ▶





They launch from the Shelley Beach lookout, and, if the wind is right, they are able to glide for as long as they please (the record is over eight hours) along the park's coastline. The steep cliffs create ideal updrafts for hang-gliding, giving gliders the unusual ability to take off and, after soaring to gain height, land at the same place.

If the wind doesn't allow this they can land at Shelley Beach. The beach is bounded at both ends by huge granite boulders, formed at the same time as the granites of the Porongurup Range, 79 km to the north.

The grassed area used to be larger than it is now, but was stripped back by enormous seas in the Southern Ocean storms of 1984 - a grim reminder of the potential danger of large seas on the South Coast.

### CODE OF THE CAPE

Other areas are accessible only by four-wheel-drive. The road to the Cape itself turns off Shelley Beach Road. There is a Code of the Cape sign on the right side of the track. Its message is simple:

Please:

- Engage 4WD
- Reduce tyre pressure to 110 kpa (16 psi)
- Keep to the track
- Take your rubbish home

**BE CAREFUL:** Ocean swells and cliffs can be dangerous



The sign was installed with the assistance of the West Cape Howe National Park Association, which is keen to help protect the park. There is some more handiwork of local volunteers a little further on. A section of track which was badly eroded has been closed and covered with brush to help new vegetation to establish.

Four-wheel-drive tracks snake through the sand hills, forming an unsightly network of spaghetti strands across the park. Track erosion is a major management problem in West Cape Howe. This, as well as many other issues, is being addressed in a draft management

The 'black granite' cliffs of West Cape Howe are actually dolerite.  
Photo - Ian Herford ▲ ▲

Students from the nearby Woodbury-Boston Environmental School examine the network of four-wheel-drive tracks that mar coastal dunes.  
Photo - Ian Herford ▲

plan being prepared for the park. The draft plan has had extensive input from park users, and its recommendations should help restore and protect the park's vegetation, while accommodating recreational access.

## CANVAS OF COLOUR

The park's fragile vegetation is well worth protecting. In spring the park is a canvas of blazing colour. The striking reds of templetonias, vivid blues of *Scaevola crassifolia* and pinks of the pimelias combine with the yellows of *Dryandra formosa* and slender banksia to create a showy display.

Scrub heath on sandy soils, characteristic of the South Coast, is common. Dense clumps of peppermint grow as tall as the winds allow and are home to the ringtailed possum. These shy animals are only ever seen on a night walk through the park.

The soft-leaved woolly bush also stands in defiance of the wind. Beneath it, jacksonias, melaleucas, and wattles form a dense shrub layer typical of the wind-pruned heathlands of the South Coast. Many of the shrubs in this area may have their heights genetically fixed to ensure they are not too exposed to coastal winds. Coastal variants of shrubs like *Lysinema ciliatum* and *Pimelia clavata* usually have thicker leaves than their counterparts in other places, and *Bossiaea linophylla* has redder leaves.

A rare finch, the red-eared firetail, lives in dense gully vegetation which it may have once shared with the famous noisy scrub-bird. A record in *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*, published in 1900, indicates that the bird bred in this area before its range contracted to the Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve to the east. Another rare bird, the ground parrot, may also occur in the park - a number of visiting ornithologists believe they have heard its call.

WA Museum records also indicate that, at least in the past, the park has been home to the honey possum, quokka, woylie and numbat, although there have been no official records of these species for many years.

## BLACK CLIFFS

At the last dune ridge, there are spectacular views of the Cape and the Southern Ocean. To the right, the coastline sweeps towards Bornholm Beach, famous for its salmon fishing, and on to William Bay National Park, 57 km to the west. Ahead, the dark cliffs of West Cape Howe contrast with the muted colours of the granites and limestones in the rest of the park.

The route to the Cape has several small tracks branching to the coast. The first of these winds to Golden Gates Beach, one of the area's best surfing spots. Others give access to rock fishing spots such as The Steps, which are among the best on the South Coast.

Just before the cliffs, the vegetation changes abruptly, becoming lower and more sparse. The soil, derived from the black igneous rock which forms the Cape itself, also changes colour. This rock, called black granite by the locals, is actually dolerite. It was squeezed up as molten rock from deep below the earth's crust and cooled below the surface, allowing the formation of relatively large crystals.

The constant salt spray and the heavy soils of the Cape create a perched saline wetland on top of the cliffs. This supports the dome-like shrub *Andersonia sprengelioides*, other species of *Andersonia* and samphires. This unusual vegetation formation is more extensively represented at West Cape Howe than at other south-coast locations.



Swamp bottlebrush (*Beaufortia sparsa*) usually grows in masses of two-metre-tall shrubs, with brilliant flowers in late summer.

Photo - Tony Tapper ▲

Some of the best rock climbers in Australia frequent the cliffs of the Cape.

Photo - Richard Rathbone ▼





As well as hosting unusual plants, the clayey soils of the clifftops are also home to a terrestrial crab. This strange creature prefers not to mix with its counterparts on the rocks below the cliffs.

The cliffs of West Cape Howe plummet 75 metres into the sea that pounds relentlessly at their base. The sheer drop and gusting winds make it a dangerous spot; even so, you may notice something move halfway up the cliff - a tiny human figure, with what looks like a thread of cotton trailing to the rocks below. The Cape offers some of the best rock climbing in Australia and attracts some of the world's best climbers.

The track continues towards Dunskey Beach, visible from the lookout above Shelley Beach. The short, sandy beach at the bottom of a steep hill is protected from the prevailing south-westerly winds.

### SEA LIONS AND SPONGES

Off shore, sponge reefs provide the opportunity for divers to explore the rich marine life of the South Coast. New Zealand fur seals and Australian sea lions cruise along the shore in search of fish. Further out to sea, southern right whales, sometimes accompanied by their young, can be seen. These animals were hunted



almost to extinction by whalers, but are now gradually increasing in number. They can sometimes be seen from the park's cliffs and lookouts, particularly in winter.

West Cape Howe, despite its small size, is many things to many people. It offers an exciting range of recreational experiences. Though not everyone may wish to hang-glide, climb rocks or dive, the park provides a chance to get back in touch with nature. It is important for us all that such places exist. ▣

The wind- and wave-swept coast can be wild and dangerous, as a result of sometimes huge seas.

Photo - Tony Tapper ▲

Unspoilt Shelley Beach is one of the major drawcards of West Cape Howe. It can be reached by car - or hang-glider.

Photo - Jiri Lochman ◀

Ian Herford is the Planning Officer for CALM's South Coast region, and is currently preparing the Draft Management Plan for West Cape Howe National Park. He can be contacted at CALM's Albany Office on (098) 417 133. The draft management plan will be released in 1991 and will be available for public comment. Betty Swainson provided the inspiration for this article and Neville Marchant gave valuable advice on park flora.

# LANDSCOPE

VOLUME SIX NO. 1 - SPRING EDITION 1990



*In the central Kimberley, a screw-pine-surrounded creek - just one of the threatened areas in this fragile frontier. Turn to page 22.*



*Until 1984 more was known about what was underneath the Nullarbor than what was on top. But with such a vast area to study, where do we start? See page 16.*



*Public awareness and involvement is vital in the conservation of WA's rare and endangered flora. Page 49.*



*Ten WA mammal species have become extinct in the last 200 years. What can be done to ensure no more are lost forever? Page 28.*



*Forests protect our environment. They also provide timber. How do we strike a balance? Turn to page 35.*

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*Illustrated by Martin Thompson.*



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