WOODEN GOLD

Sandalwood has been exported from Shark Bay for 100 years. The timber was extracted and carted to the beaches, where it was taken by small craft to a waiting "mother ship" for export. One can only marvel at the perseverance of early harvesters, who had to cross the wattle thickets where sandalwood grows best.

There is currently a small sandalwood-pulling operation on Nanga Station. Unlike that growing in other parts of WA, Shark Bay sandalwood is able to coppice - that is, after the tree is cut down, the stump and roots will send up new stems. The coppice shoots start producing seed again in three to four years. The tree will continue to fruit and provide the potential for new trees to grow from seed, ensuring that harvesting can be sustained. In fact, the pullers on Nanga Station are reworking old sandalwood tracks from the 1930s, using timber that has since regenerated. This suggests that sandalwood can probably be removed on a 60-year rotational basis on Nanga, even with stock grazing.

Left: *A sandalwood cutter's camp on Nanga Station. Sandalwood taken from this area will regrow to harvestable size in about 60 years.*
Photo - Bill Bachman

Below: *The aromatic sandalwood is exported to south-east Asia, where it is used to make joss sticks for religious ceremonies.*
Photo - Bill Bachman

The reasons for the special qualities of Shark Bay sandalwood are not clearly understood. Perhaps the deeper red sand loams and more regular rainfall results in a much bigger tap root system; this stores higher reserves of energy which can encourage coppice growth. In the more arid areas, tap root development is usually hindered by hard pans, and rainfall is much more sporadic. In these areas, sandalwood is usually pulled out by machine so that the plant is fully utilised. At Shark Bay, the tree is cut off at ground level, so that there is no damage to the surrounding environment and the stump can send out new stems.

The unpalatable leaves are another unusual characteristic of Shark Bay sandalwood. The leaves taste bitter and are thus avoided by domestic stock, rabbits and other herbivores. Shoots of new seedlings and coppice stems are able to flourish without grazing pressure, a factor that also helps Shark Bay sandalwood regenerate after the mature trees are removed. Elsewhere in the State, sandalwood is extensively grazed by sheep, rabbits and goats.

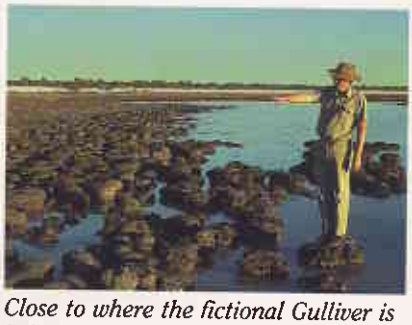
Research is under way to try to increase the overall population of sandalwood by sowing fresh seed beside potential hosts. Preferred hosts seem to include wattle species, especially kurara (*Acacia tetragonophylla*). This work is encouraging and it is hoped that there will be good germination after the heavy winter rains of 1991.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME SEVEN NO.2 SUMMER EDITION 1991-92

When European scientists first set foot on our shores they found a bewildering array of animals and plants. Péron the Explorer *takes an intimate look at the French scientist whose name lives in Western Australia's newest national park. See page 20.*

This tour of the Gascoyne's desert coast guides you through Shark Bay and WA's newest national park. See page 10.



Close to where the fictional Gulliver is believed to have been shipwrecked lives one of the world's oldest organisms. Lilliput's Castles, *on page 34, describes the creatures and the ecosystem they have built.*

Seagrass covers 3 700 square kilometres of the ocean floor around Shark Bay. Grasses of the Sea, *on page 42, takes us on a journey through these underwater meadows.*

At first glance, Shark Bay is dry, arid and inhospitable. But if you look more closely you discover its Hidden Treasures. *See page 16.*

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

Green turtles (Chelonia mydas), *the commonest turtles found along our coast, begin to congregate in the waters of Shark Bay from the end of July. The Bay is the southernmost nesting area for these long-lived animals. During summer, female green turtles lay their eggs on the white sandy beaches of Bernier, Dorre and Dirk Hartog Islands, and occasionally at the northern tip of Peron Peninsula. Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky.*

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