





BUILDING A BETTER BIBBULMUN TRACK

BY JESSE BRAMPTON

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, an idea was conceived to build a long-distance walking trail from Perth to Albany. Over the past twenty-four years, this innovative trail, called the Bibbulmun Track, survived many changes, governments, users and caretakers. Its driving force, however, has always remained the same, to encourage people to go bush and experience the natural wonders of Western Australia's south-west.



In July 1972, Geoff Schafer walked into the office of the Minister for Forests, H.D. Evans, with an innovative idea designed to encourage people from Western Australia's urban areas to go bush. The Minister liked the idea and sent Geoff to the State's Forests Department with a green light to go ahead. And so the Bibbulmun Track was born.

A bushwalking enthusiast, Geoff believed Western Australia's south-west had the bushland and climate for a long-distance trail. As a former Victorian, he had seen, first-hand, Victoria's Alpine Way trail and so used it as a basis for a Perth-to-Albany track. His idea, however, raised concerns in the Forests Department, which at the time had a small recreation budget and little knowledge of long-distance trails.

Fortunately, several officers seized on Geoff's idea and set about overcoming the considerable challenges it posed. Foremost among these were Peter Hewett and Ross Gobby, who played significant roles in transforming the idea into reality, a process that took almost two years.

By September 1972, the enthusiastic planning team had designed a Lancelin-to-Albany walk, via the Leeuwin-Naturaliste ridge. This design proved unrealistic and was abandoned in favour of a shorter Kalamunda-to-Northcliffe proposal.

With this change of route, the early name 'Perth to Albany Track' was abandoned. Many options were considered until Kirup forester Len Talbot suggested the track be named in

recognition of the Aboriginal people who had inhabited an area south-west of Pemberton—the Bibbulmun people. This suggestion was considered appropriate, as it recognised the Bibbulmun people's practice of walking long distances for ceremonial gatherings.

LAYING THE TRACK

March 1974 marked the first ground alignment of the track. For the next four years, the route was modified as various parties sought to ensure their own interests. Despite this, walkers continued to use the track throughout the seventies, with the Forests Department receiving more than 1 000 enquiries a year.

In October 1979, the Bibbulmun Track was officially opened as part of WA's 150th Year celebrations. The opening event—'Bibbulmun Walk '79', a 900-kilometre journey from Albany to Kalamunda—involved more than 1 000 walkers on different stages. Numerous schools, local shires and councils participated, with the Kalamunda Shire playing a lead role. A group of hardy souls walked the whole distance, becoming the first official 'End-to-Enders'. This positive community response reflected the track's growing acceptance as a means of recreational access to the forests of the south-west.

THE CALM YEARS

In 1987, the newly formed Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) decided to undertake a significant overhaul of the track. This included the relocation of the northern section, between Kalamunda and Dwellingup, farther east to avoid bauxite-mining sites. The southern end was extended eastward from Northcliffe's Boorara Tree to Walpole, passing through the recently declared Shannon National Park.

This project, overseen by project officer Drew Griffiths, saw the adoption of the distinctive *Waugal* symbol as a trail marker and the incorporation of the track into the State's Heritage Trail network. To promote these changes, CALM produced a new colour guide book, replacing the original 1979 black-and-white version.



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Main: Waalegh Campsite at sunset.
Inset: Wandoo forest, south of Mount Dale.



It was estimated that around this time more than 5 000 people walked the track each year, with the majority being short-term hikers undertaking walks of one to three days. This reflected the real aim of Geoff Schafer's original idea, to inspire would-be walkers to go bush.

BUILDING A BETTER BIBBULMUN TRACK

In the early 1990s, the Bibbulmun Track faced a growing number of problems, mainly associated with other land uses such as forestry operations, mining, water catchment and roads. In October 1993, CALM began a bold plan to renovate the track, with the aim of solving these problems permanently and turning it into one of the world's great long-distance walks.

The proposed route included a radical realignment, retaining barely 10 per cent of the old route and adding a significant south coast extension, some 180 kilometres farther east to Albany—thereby fulfilling the original idea of a 'Perth-to-Albany' walk.

The new alignment placed the majority of the track in conservation estates. As these estates encompass many of the State's premier natural areas, walkers would be able to experience the

best of the south-west, a key component of the project's purpose.

To ensure community involvement, significant input was sought from all levels of government, the corporate sector, service clubs, schools, outdoor and bushwalking clubs and the wider community.

The project was funded by a Federal grant, provided through the Regional Development Program and worth some \$1.38 million over two years. This was matched by contributions from CALM, the Ministry of Justice, Regional Development Commissions and Employment Training programs.

Further funds were received from a range of corporate sponsors including Alcoa of Australia, Worsley Alumina, Griffin Coal, Hedges Gold, CSBP, Mountain Designs, Cullity Timbers and Scotch College. To top off the outstanding support from the corporate sector, the Federation of Bushwalking Clubs obtained a grant from the Gordon Reid Foundation (Lotteries Commission) for construction of seven additional campsites on the new track.

CAMP CONSTRUCTION

Campsites are a key feature of the track, with 46 new sites being built

Above: A walker stops for lunch on the track in a shady spot south-east of Mundaring.

Above left: Farther south, the track runs through karri forest. Here, it crosses the Donnelly River at Boardinghouse Bridge.

between 10 and 20 kilometres apart. Each site features a unique three-walled timber sleeping shelter providing all-weather accommodation for eight to 12 people. Water is provided from a 6 800-litre rainwater tank, using the shelter roof as catchment. Other site facilities include an outdoor picnic table, concrete barbecue, rustic bush toilet and tent sites.

The project team has ensured that all sites are accessible only on foot, significantly reducing the likelihood of vandalism and maintaining a sense of wilderness more in keeping with the ethos of the track. Sites were also chosen for their aesthetic appeal and practicality, with several, including Waalegh near Mundaring Weir and Blackwood perched high above the river valley, offering breathtaking views.

To complement the facilities, hundreds of kilometres of new walk track is under construction. To expedite this



back-breaking task, a small 4WD tractor, fitted with a hydraulic blade and a rear-mounted 'flail mower', has been used. Funded by the CALM-Alcoa Forest Enhancement (CAFE) Program, this machine more than halved track construction time, producing an outstanding one-metre-wide walk trail in the process.

Naturally, on a trail of this magnitude, vegetation and soil types differ, requiring different techniques and equipment to be used. In the tall karri country around Manjimup, Pemberton and Walpole, larger machinery is needed, particularly in the steep and spectacular Donnelly and Warren River valleys. Further south, the soft sands and limestone of the south coast demand a whole new range of practices.

WHO'S HELPING

Since the beginning of major construction in 1996, a wide variety of work crews have been involved. Foremost of these, have been the Ministry of Justice crews based at Karnet and Pardelup Prison Farms. This unique partnership follows a successful trial program using a construction crew of minimum-security prisoners from Wooroloo Prison Farm, late in 1994.

This joint venture has proved to be a success for the project, the Ministry of Justice and the prisoners, who gained useful work skills while making positive contributions to the community. Their work is also reported to have had a positive impact on their self-esteem.

In addition to field construction work, the Ministry of Justice undertook the prefabrication of shelters, toilets and tables in prison workshops, once again providing productive work for prisoners while achieving significant cost savings in construction.

Top left: The 4WD Kubota tractor makes light work of trail building.

Top right: Trail building the hard way. A Wooroloo Prison crew clears vegetation along the new alignment.

Centre left: Waalegh shelter in its construction phase—one of 46 new shelters along the track.

Left: Bornholm Beach, West Cape Howe National Park—part of the new south coast extension.



The Bibbulmun Track vision also attracted a number of groups to volunteer for campsite construction tasks. The Collie Combined Service Clubs have undertaken three weekend busy bees, building the Yourdemung and Harris Dam sites north of Collie and the Noggerup site south of the Preston River. Staff from Worsley Alumina volunteered for similar construction weekends, completing both the Possum Springs and Dookanelly sites that were sponsored by the company. The Army Reserve's 13th Field Squadron built the Blackwood and Palings sites during a field-training exercise.

Early in the project, considerable work was done by Department of Employment, Education and Training job skills programs. These included trail and campsite construction near Albany, boardwalk, bridge and trail work around Peaceful Bay, and campsite and trail construction south of Collie.

More recently, a Landcare and Environmental Action Program (LEAP) crew completed the first campsite for people with disabilities just north of the Brookton Highway. In addition to the work done by community groups, crews and staff from all eight CALM Districts along the route have been involved and continue to provide the backbone for the project.

THE FUTURE

A new series of updated maps and guides are being produced. This will ensure that users of the new Bibbulmun Track have ready access to the information they require for safe and enjoyable outings. Each of these will feature extensive track notes, topographical maps, profiles, and details of towns and places of interest. Information is also available on *NatureBase*, CALM's award-winning internet site. An information and educational CD-ROM is planned for the near future.

The project's construction phase is in two parts, with the northern half from Kalamunda to Brockman Highway due for completion in August 1997. The southern half, from Nannup through to Albany, will open a year later. The first section of the new track, from Kalamunda to Brookton Highway, opened in August 1995. The popularity of this section reinforces the belief that WA is ready for a true world-class walk track. Opening this section early allowed the project team to incorporate users' comments into refined plans and procedures for other parts of the track. This will ensure that the Bibbulmun Track of the future will truly be a walker's paradise, designed by walkers, built (at least in part) by walkers, for the use of walkers.

Mt Cooke, the highest peak in the Darling Range. The walk trail winds northward to the distant Mt Dale.

When completed, it will stretch some 950 kilometres through a variety of jarrah, marri, wandoo, karri and tingle forests, interspersed with coastal peppermint and heathlands. It will cross some of the most beautiful and wild areas of the southwest, including the spectacular south coast, and offer views and facilities unrivalled on any long-distance trail in Australia. It will be a significant addition to the State's tourism industry, attracting interstate and international tourists. And, more importantly, it will fulfil Geoff Schafer's original dream of a long-distance walk track designed to encourage us all to go bush.

Jesse Brampton is the coordinator of the 'Building a Better Bibbulmun Track Project'. He is an enthusiastic long-distance walker who has logged in excess of 7 000 kilometres in the last 10 years, including end-to-end walks of the Bibbulmun Track and America's 3 450-km Appalachian Trail. Jesse can be contacted on (09) 334 0265 or e-mail: bibtrack@calm.wa.gov.au.

All photos by Jesse Brampton.

LANDSCOPE

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Aquatic bugs are helping scientists to determine the health of WA's waterways. See Spineless Indicators on page 49.



CALM's new Marine Conservation Branch gets in deep (page 10) to play its vital role in safeguarding the health of WA's unique marine environment.



Called 'Karlamilyi' by desert Aborigines, Rudall River National Park (page 28) is steeped in history and bristling with wildlife.



The economic, social and conservation potential of Acacia in WA, a story of a golden future on page 16.



Fancy a walk? Join us while we look at the environment, history and building of a new Bibbulmun Track. See page 36.

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The tiny pebble-mound mouse of the Pilbara (see story on page 42) is a tireless night-worker and the architect of many odd, red gravelly mounds, which look like miniature volcanoes among spinifex.

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