WILL THE ORWELLIAN FORCES WIN?

As I write these words it appears that the 'season of mist and mellow fruitfulness' (in the words of John Keats) has descended on the south-west of Western Australia. The soaking rains that finally came after one of our driest summers on record hopefully have brought an end to our bushfire season (although it is always possible that we could suffer one last kick of blasting heat).

Just as it is certain that seasons change, so it is certain that as CALM and the bushfire brigades commence autumn prescribed burning, some sections of the community will reignite their campaign against the use of prescribed fire to control bushfires and maintain biodiversity (see 'A Fire for all Reasons', in this issue).

Probably more than any place on Earth—largely because our vegetation and climate make us the most bushfire-prone area in the world—we have more knowledge of fire behaviour and the effect of fire on ecosystems. (That is why the CSIRO has chosen WA to carry out a multi-million-dollar study of bushfire behaviour this summer.) There is incontrovertible evidence that frequent fire is a natural factor in our environment, and that it is impossible to control bushfires—even if we had access to the United States 7th Fleet and Marine Corps—in areas that have not been prescribed burned for long periods. There is no question—and this comes from the oral history of indigenous people and the observations of early explorers—that indigenous people regularly used fire as a management tool. But even in the absence of man, our ecosystems were and are frequently ignited by lightning strikes.

Sadly, while our knowledge of the physics and ecology of fire is very high, our understanding of the politics surrounding the issue is dismal. Some time ago I attempted to lay the basis for an analytical approach to explain the political forces that result in the community's response to the fire issue, by hypothesising that the opposition to prescribed burning was directly proportional to the time since the last bushfire disaster. But this hypothesis was destroyed this bushfire season by the fact that there was an intensive campaign against prescribed burning running at the same time that we were facing massive bushfires in Western Australia and New South Wales that tragically resulted in seven people losing their lives.

During the 1997 autumn and spring prescribed burning programs, a whiff of smoke or the slightest haze (none of which posed any health risk) over the metropolitan area was the trigger for political and media hysteria. Yet over Christmas and New Year, during high temperature periods that can cause smoke to combine with other pollutants to form photochemical smog, bushfires around the south-west caused a massive pall of smoke over Perth for several days, yet there was a deafening silence.

The impact of campaigns against prescribed burning is not just to dent the morale of bushfire brigade and CALM firefighters. The constraints on prescribed burning (restrictions on the number of days that burning can be carried out) have accumulated and we now have dangerous levels of fuel similar to those that preceded the Dwellingup wildfire of 1961, in the northern jarrah forest. There is no doubt that if these constraints on prescribed burning continue, we will see the same tragic loss of life and property (and massive smoke haze over Perth) that occurs almost annually on the eastern seaboard of Australia occurring in Western Australia in the future.

Over the next several issues of LANDSCOPE *we will be publishing a series of articles on bushfires and the ecological effects of fire, in an attempt to use truth and logic to counter the 'Orwellian' forces that are in danger of controlling bushfire and prescribed burning policies.*

The Publisher

THE ELUSIVE MOUNTAIN PAPER HEATH

A search of WA Herbarium records at the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) in Como has shown that, until recently, there was only one record of the mountain paper heath (*Sphenotoma drummondii*) occurring outside the Stirling Range National Park and Mount Manypeaks. This was recorded in 1985 as being found by A. N. Rodd and G. Fensom, on a granite outcrop near Walpole, but despite several searches by CALM staff, this population remained elusive.

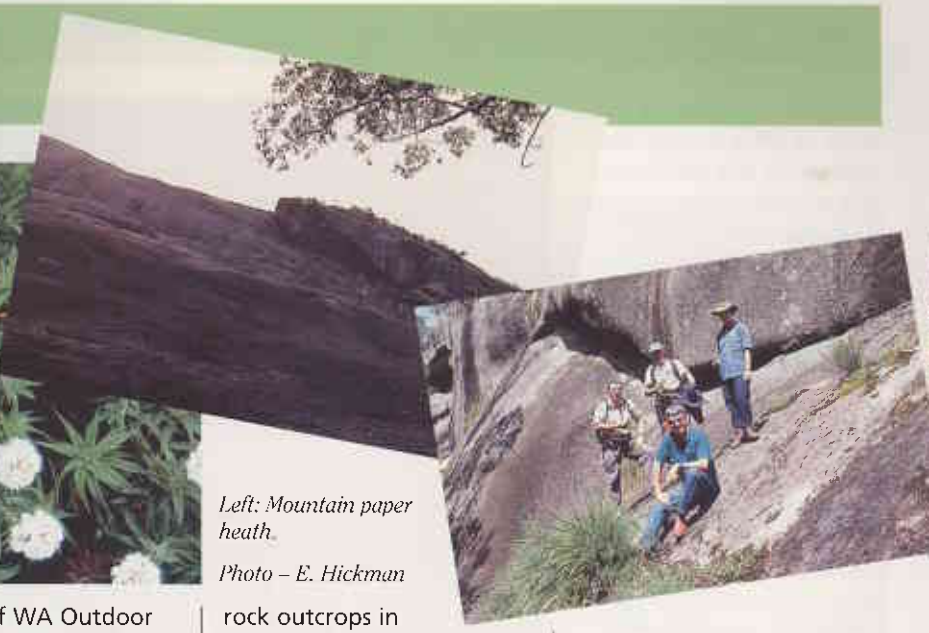
Eventually, reports began to arrive, of a population in a crevice of a granite outcrop, half way up a sheer cliff face, and a search party was organised to collect specimens. The party included Walpole District rangers Carl Beck and Chris Mathers, who are keen rock climbers. Carl opted to undertake the arduous task of abseiling down to the crevice, while Chris secured the ropes. CALM Volunteer Andrew Crawford, Acting Nature Conservation Program Leader Russell Smith and consultant biologist Leonie Monks directed Carl's descent from below. Carl located more than 18 plants, all of which appeared healthy, and with several of them in flower. Botanist Kristina Lemson later confirmed a specimen of the find as the mountain paper heath.

The mountain paper heath is a spectacular plant that grows to between 15 and 30 centimetres high in sandstone and quartzite cracks and crevices. It has densely crowded, lance-shaped leaves that clasp the stem, and the flower head, which appears from October to December, is made up of up to 40 tiny white flowers, compacted together at the top of a stem.

The significance of the discovery at Walpole lies in the fact that in its only other known locations (in the Stirling Range, where there are only about 10 known populations, and at Mount Manypeaks, where there is only one), it is under serious threat from dieback, which is caused by the pathogen *Phytophthora cinnamomi*.

Dieback is known to be widespread in the Stirling Range, and the mountain paper heath—a member of a family of heaths highly susceptible to invasion by *Phytophthora*—is expected to be killed if the pathogen reaches the area where the plants grow (and in a few instances this has already occurred). Because of the threat of *Phytophthora*, mountain paper heath has been ranked as Critically Endangered, by CALM's Threatened Species Scientific Committee. CALM's WA Threatened Species and Communities Unit (WATSCU) is preparing an interim recovery plan for the species that will identify the threats to its survival, and prescribe management practices which, it is hoped, will reduce the impact of these threats.

As part of the recovery process outlined in the Interim Recovery Plan, a search for new populations of the species is recommended. Finding the plants at Walpole means that there is a population



Left: Mountain paper heath.

Photo – E. Hickman

that is secure from the threat of dieback. It also means there is a possibility that the plant might be found growing on other granite outcrops between Walpole and the Stirling Range. Already the University of WA Outdoor Club has undertaken a search for this species near Mount Romance, so far without success. Carl and Chris have also volunteered to keep an eye open for this species while climbing other rock outcrops in the Walpole area. It is hoped that with this kind of search effort, other populations of the species will turn up and the mountain paper heath will have a brighter future.

Above left: *The terrain where the mountain paper heath was found.*

Above: *The search party, left to right, Carl Beck, Chris Mather, Andrew Crawford and, seated, Russell Smith.*

Photos – Leonie Monks

LANDSCOPE

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CALM's fight against feral cats gathers ground on Peron Peninsula with the development and testing of a cat bait. See 'Approaching Eden' on page 28.

Roadside vegetation often provides vital links between remnant habitats. See our story on page 23.

A new CALM book gives bushwalkers a host of short and longer walks in Western Australia's south-west. See page 10.

What attracted early pioneers to this barren corner of Western Australia? Find out in 'Eucla Pioneers' on page 35.

Fire is an important part of Western Australia's environment. Scientists continue to discover just how important. See page 17.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

The splendid fairy wren was one of many birds collected by John Gilbert, whose collections of specimens have been fragmented over the past 100 years or so. Now, they are being tracked down in museums around the world, and a more complete picture of their original distributions is emerging from Gilbert's original notes and labels. See story on page 40.

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