



A TRACK WINDING BACK

More and more people are heading 'off-highway' into the heart of the outback, in modern four-wheel-drive vehicles, equipped with refrigeration, generators and even satellite communications. Remote tracks that could once be travelled for weeks at a time without seeing another soul, now bear streams of traffic in peak season. More people bring more pressure, and Western Australia's historic Canning Stock Route was in danger of becoming neglected. Now, under new plans, the track will be protected and cared for in a cooperative effort by government agencies, industry, land holders, the public and, most importantly, recreational users themselves.

BY MANDY CLEWS

From humble and practical beginnings at the turn of the century, the Canning Stock Route has evolved into one of the Australia's great bush adventures. The 1,800-kilometre track that crosses four deserts is a journey through remote, breath-taking country: the breakaways, springs, giant salt pans, mysterious rocky outcrops and endless dunes that have made the 'Australian outback' legendary to the rest of the world.

Twenty years ago it was estimated that perhaps 50 vehicles a year made use of the Canning Stock Route. In contrast, some 1,200 vehicles visited the Route in 1997. The figure has been calculated by the number of people seeking advice before embarking on the track, the number notifying police of their movements, and the number of fuel drops ordered from the Capricorn Roadhouse on the Great Northern

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Durba Springs, a popular camping spot on the Canning Stock Route.

Below: Travellers compare notes on the Route. Contact with other adventurers is common nowadays: twenty years ago it was rare.
Photos - Jiri Lochman



Highway. The increased pressure on the track has been staggering. And it took its toll. By 1996, travellers were expressing concern at the poor state of the track. They found it to be badly eroded in places, littered with rubbish and discarded fuel drums, and ravaged by poor environmental practices used by a few, such as cutting live trees for firewood and careless driving over fragile ground.

Some ten years ago, the Keep Australia Beautiful Council erected signs advising campers to burn and bury their rubbish. The signs may have been appropriate for the usage pressure on the route at the time (which was perhaps pushing upward towards a hundred vehicles), but they were not suitable for the assault of more than a thousand vehicles that was taking hold in the 1990s, with the explosion of

interest in outdoor recreation. It was becoming clear to all who cared about the track that it was time for another clean-up, an overhaul of recommended camping practices and a more coordinated, long-term approach to management.

CONSERVATION WITHOUT BORDERS

In addition to its statutory responsibility for the more than 20 million hectares of conservation-vested lands and waters, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) also has an interest in promoting the responsible use and management of 'off-reserve' areas. The Canning Stock Route is a perfect example of an area that does not necessarily have to have the word 'conservation' stamped on it in any formal sense for organisations like CALM to have a stake in their sensible management.

There was clearly a need for a model of inter-agency management to be established, involving the Department of Land Administration (DOLA), the Keep Australia Beautiful Council, the Western Australian Four-Wheel-Drive



Association and the Heritage Council of Western Australia—under whose auspices the Canning Stock Route had been integrated into the WA Heritage Trails Network (set up in 1987 under Australia's Bicentennial grants program). Also among the stakeholders in the future of the Route were a number of individual users. These included Eric and Ronele Gard—four-wheel-drive enthusiasts who first visited the Route in 1980 and who have since made it the basis of a successful four-wheel-drive touring company.

Late in 1996, these agencies and individuals came together with the already-established Tread Lightly! organisation to form a working party to address the land use issues facing the Canning Stock Route. By September 1997, the working party had evolved into Track Care Western Australia (Incorporated), a body that is now setting new standards for the coordinated management of the Route and other trails like it. To date, Track Care has organised and overseen a major clean-up along the track and coordinated fundraising to improve facilities there. Its committee members, who represent a range of stakeholders



across a variety of land uses, have also workshopped a draft management plan for the track.

AN HISTORIC TRACK

The Canning Stock Route's story began with 'red water fever', a tick-borne disease endemic in East Kimberley cattle. The animals were forbidden from being driven through the West Kimberley and Pilbara regions for fear of spreading the disease. Pastoralists had to ship the cattle south, at great cost and inconvenience. A total quarantine of East Kimberley cattle in the early 1900s led to lobbying by pastoralists in the region, who convinced State leaders that an inland cattle-run would enable the stock to be brought south, while eliminating the ticks, which would not survive the harsh desert conditions. In 1906, a survey party under the leadership of Alfred Wernam Canning was sent to establish

the route between Wiluna in the centre and Halls Creek to the north. In 1908, Canning returned to the site with a construction crew to establish water points along the route.

By the end of the 1950s, the route had had its day as a cattle run, as more modern means of transport took over. But the Canning Stock Route, with its system of wells, was still convenient for inland travel by Aboriginal people, pastoralists, mining and exploration expeditions, and a handful of recreational users.

In 1980, four-wheel-drive enthusiasts Eric and Ronele Gard first visited the track and were bowled over by the experience. They began travelling there frequently, and got the red dust in their veins. By 1986, they had established a touring company, Western Desert Guides, with the Canning Stock Route as their main focus. They soon became very familiar with the Route, so much so that when Western Australia's Heritage Committee decided to include it in the network of WA Heritage Trails, Eric and Ronele were approached to collaborate in erecting the interpretive signs along its length. It was a project they undertook with great satisfaction.

But although there were signs politely directing travellers to behave responsibly, and although the Gards carried out what maintenance they could, there was no overall coordinated management program for the track. By the 1990s, the numbers using the track brought the potential environmental problems to the forefront, and it was clear some intervention was needed.



Top right: Thring Rock, an imposing feature on the Gibson Desert landscape. Photo – Steve Sadler

These two common desert dwellers — thorny devil (above left) and perentie (left) — are often seen crossing the track or basking in the hot sun nearby. Photo – Anne Storrie



TREAD LIGHTLY!

The problem was not unique to the Canning Stock Route. All over Australia there was a growing recognition of a need to set up public ethics in self-regulation in the bush. In 1992 a license was purchased from the United States to introduce an American program called 'Tread Lightly!'. The Australian version, 'Tread Lightly! Australia—A National Land Use Ethics Program', recognises that most

irresponsible behaviour in the bush stems from a lack of knowledge of how to minimise impact. The program relies on sponsorship and support from the public and private sector to fund education programs for people heading bush (see *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 1995).

But for an area as big and remote as the Canning Stock Route, it was clear that a coordinated approach was needed at the local level. The formation of Track Care enabled the planning of a major clean-up for the Route. This was

an exercise that would include replacing all the signs formerly advising travellers to burn and bury their rubbish, with signs advising them to take their rubbish with them—one of the most important practical messages for responsible four-wheel-drive track use. The biggest project in the clean-up was the installation of a toilet at a well-used campsite.

A DUNNY IN THE DESERT

It is difficult to imagine how building a toilet could be fulfilling work. But seeing to this most basic of needs at Durba Springs marked a pinnacle of achievement for Track Care, and the high-tech composting waste system that was installed there is a symbol of the



Above: Durba Springs is a peaceful and picturesque camping spot on the Route.
Photo – Marie Lochman

Left: Creative sign posting and roadside landmarks are part of the character of the Route.
Photo – Steve Sadler

Above right: The Durba Springs 'dunny' is an earthy and practical symbol of the spirit of cooperation of TrackCare.
Photo – Ronele Gard

Right: Durba Hills after sunset.
Photo – Marie Lochman

new spirit of shared care and responsibility on the Route.

Toilet facilities at Durba Springs had long been a problem. After all, taking collective responsibility for this most basic of human functions in the bush goes against human nature, and this favoured camping spot deep in the Little Sandy Desert was becoming overwhelmed by people pressure. The old drop-pit toilet was frequently filled to overflowing, and campers were resorting to using the area behind the main camping area as an open-air bush toilet. The result was a camping area of questionable hygiene and safety, surrounded with the ugly

evidence of trails of toilet paper.

Track Care took the initiative of planning, fundraising, purchasing and installing a composting toilet at the site. The Victorian-built 'Rotaloo', specially designed for remote and arid conditions, renders waste material into inoffensive compost, with the aid of a solar-powered extraction fan. The organisation took on a massive fundraising effort to raise the \$17,000 necessary to complete the project. Support came from 22 out of 24 tour companies and a long list of sponsors including four-wheel-drive associations and clubs, a major vehicle distributor, and a host of business and individual

donors. A painting of Durba Springs was donated for a raffle and support from volunteers poured in.

Easter was not the best time of year to be travelling in the desert, with temperatures still high and bush flies at their worst. Nevertheless, a party of 19 volunteers, including vehicles and labour on loan from the Navy and Army, made its way inland. On the first day, the site was cleared, holes were dug, concrete was mixed by hand, large rocks were collected and hammered into aggregate, and quantities of water were carried from the spring nearly 200 metres away. The frenzy of activity continued for another three days, with



TREAD LIGHTLY AND TRACK CARE

A rocky road is a fitting metaphor for the course that brought Tread Lightly! and Track Care into being. Relations between four-wheel-drive organisations and the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), in which many four-wheel-drive areas are vested, were not always harmonious. But out of early conflict emerged Tread Lightly! and Track Care, and a new era of understanding and cooperation between land management authorities and four-wheel-drive organisations. The Canning Stock Route clean-up serves as an outstanding example of this new partnership, and Track Care will soon be expanding in scope to encompass other four-wheel-drive tracks in WA, such as the Holland Track in the southern Wheatbelt and the Len Beadell roads that network their way through the desert country.

Track Care welcomes enquiries from prospective members. For further information, contact the committee on (08) 9341 2524.



the installation of the bins and toilet, construction of the building, and cabling of the solar-powered fan and lighting system. Workers soldiered on to the strains of bagpipes brought along by one volunteer. There would be few situations where the act of installing a toilet should be carried out with such high morale and sense of purpose, let alone to musical accompaniment.

MANAGEMENT THAT FITS

The Canning Stock Route is one of the great four-wheel-drive adventures of the world. The fact that it cuts through so many types of landscapes and land tenure is one of its characterising features. Left completely unmanaged, it was in danger of being spoiled, but its character would be equally spoiled if it were to be regulated as a single entity by a single agency. To have some central authority dictating and enforcing rules about its use would go against the Route's character. It has been demonstrated the world over that the chances of conservation efforts succeeding are far greater when the users themselves are the stewards of the recreational resource. It brings them closer to the land and makes their experience richer. This is the guiding principle of Tread Lightly! and of Track Care WA Inc.

The Track Care Committee has begun work on a management plan for the area, addressing such matters as vision and goals, protection and restoration of cultural resources and landscape, provision of visitor information and interpretation, campsite development and maintenance, coopting volunteers, risk management, guidelines for commercial use, research and funding.

No one, least of all Canning himself, would have predicted the course the use of the Canning Stock Route would take. Since the last cattle drive down the track in 1959, the total number of cattle to have travelled the track would by now be far outstripped by the number of recreational vehicles to have made the journey. It is difficult to imagine what the work crews who spent close to two years sinking wells along the route in 1908–10 would make of the latter-day users of the stock route, seeking escape from the creature comforts and



pressures of city living. But at night, Canning's work crew would have sat around a camp-fire, with a crystal clear desert sky above them, in an experience shared ninety years later by low-impact campers. Under the grass-roots guidance of Track Care, the Canning Stock Route will continue to connect the people who built it with this and future generations who use it.



Above: A four-wheel-drive vehicle on the Talawana Track leaves a plume of desert dust as it heads for the Canning Stock Route.

Right: A bird's-eye view of Lake Disappointment. Giant salt pans are a feature of the desert country along the Route.

Photos – Jiri Lochman

Mandy Clews is a freelance writer and a regular contributing editor to *LANDSCOPE*.

In the spirit of 'Tread Lightly! Australia', credit is due to everyone who travels the Canning Stock Route and behaves responsibly. However, in the case of the Easter clean-up and the Durba Springs Dunny, there are several individuals from the Track Care Committee who were instrumental in bringing the project off and who deserve a special mention.

They are:

- Eric and Ronele Gard, Western Desert Guides (representing individual interests)
- Ian Elliot, Heritage Council of Western Australia
- Jan Scudamore, Tread Lightly! Australia
- Nick Underwood, Western 4wdriver
- Scott Kinninment, 4WD Association
- Doug McKenzie, 4WD Association
- Peta Monley, Keep Australia Beautiful Council
- John Douglas, Department of Land Administration
- Leon Rossi, Royal Automobile Club
- Wayne Schmidt, Department of Conservation and Land Management

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Can WA's sharefarming plantations also help fight greenhouse gases? See 'Farming Carbon' on page 17.



With increased numbers of travellers, the Canning Stock Route is in need of some TLC. See 'A Track Winding Back' on page 10.



The job of a CALM Wildlife Officer is as much about dealing with people as it is about protecting our native wildlife. See 'On the Wild Side' on page 23.



The Esperance Lakes Nature Reserves are a haven for water birds and a significant international wetland. See 'Picture the Lakes' on page 36.



There are billions of tiny white shells lining the 150-km Shell Beach in Shark Bay. But why are there so many concentrated here? Find out more on page 49.

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COVER

Two years into the Western Shield program and already three Western Australian native species have been brought back from the edge of extinction, and others are growing in abundance. 'Bouncing Back', on page 28, looks at the successes of the first two years and at where we hope to be at the turn of the century.

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