



# Bushranger Country

## AVON VALLEY NATIONAL PARK

As well as covering some attractive steep-sided bushland surrounding the Avon River, the area now covered by Avon Valley National Park, 80 kilometres north-east of Perth, was the main hideaway of Western Australia's most celebrated bushranger, Moondyne Joe.

**BY JOHN  
HUNTER**



**T**he jarrah forest, more typical of the south, and the drier country that characterises the northern areas meet in the Avon Valley National Park. The park's upland is about 200 metres above river level and is forested with jarrah, marri and powderbark, while white-barked wandoo trees grow in the valleys. The Avon River itself, named *Golguler* by the Nyoongar people of the Darling Plateau, is fringed with flooded gum and swamp paperbark. It runs through the centre of the park and becomes a turbulent flood in winter. During summer, the river diminishes to a series of pools in a bed of granite boulders and melaleuca thickets. A place of transitional vegetation, such as the Avon Valley National Park, creates diverse habitats for many plants and animals.



It was here that Joseph Johns, a former convict deported at the age of 22 in 1853 to the Swan River Colony for stealing some food and a kettle, chose to settle. The son of a blacksmith, convict Johns knew how to use a forge and tools and enjoyed carpentry. He also had Welsh coal-pit experience. After two years of hard labour on roads, bridges and buildings, the ticket-of-leave man had earned a conditional pardon for his hard work and good behaviour.

Not wanting to stay in the fledgling city, Joe headed north-east to look for work in the agriculturally-rich Chittering Valley. After passing the established orchards and farms along the upper Swan, Joe headed for the high country to the east. Somewhere between the Helena and the Swan rivers, in the Avon Valley, he scaled the Darling Scarp and established a beautiful but lonely retreat.

Since the first settlers arrived in 1829, naval retirees and well-to-do entrepreneurs from Britain had taken the best land grants along the wide alluvial valleys of the coastal plain and Darling Range. This left the steep, rocky and wooded river valleys of the range as a secluded refuge, a place too difficult to develop for agriculture.

## HOME FROM HOME

Joe decided that, with surrounding settlers' properties providing opportunities for work, this was the place for him. He set up a crude camp within a group of granite boulders near Moondyne Spring. His camp was on a steep slope overlooking a picturesque creek, which flowed east into the Avon River. The locals of the Moondyne Hills country started to call this friendly and cheerful man Moondyne Joe.

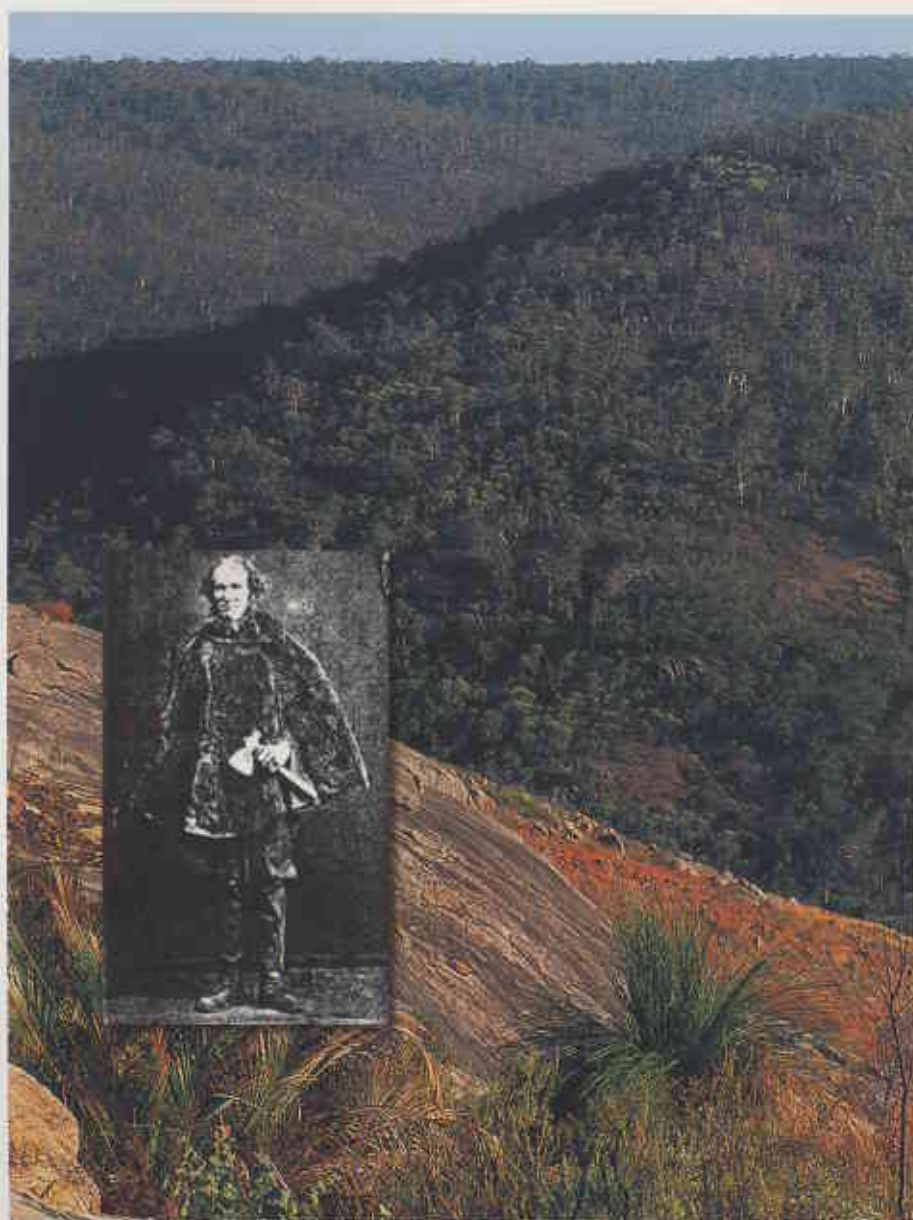
Moondyne Joe learned a lot about the landscape, and became an excellent bushman. Like others in the area, he caught possums, kangaroos, emus, water fowl, crustaceans and the occasional 'stray' sheep. Over time, his hair and beard grew long and matted, and his tattered clothes were augmented with a kangaroo skin vest and hat. To supplement his existence, Joe earned a little extra money catching stray horses for the rewards offered, and doing odd jobs in the district. According to some detractors, he actually encouraged some animals to

### Previous page

A new day on the horizon as sunrise portrays soft colours through an autumn mist in the Avon Valley National Park.

**Left:** Solitude among the hawks, where a convict might have sung 'Down in the valley, the valley so low, hang your head over here the wind blow...'

**Inset:** Joseph Johns in his late forties. Photo courtesy of Toodyay Tourist Bureau.





stray outside their owners' unfenced properties so he could claim the reward.

In 1861, troopers arrested him for horse stealing and, despite his protests, threw him into the lock-up at Newcastle (now the town of Toodyay). Before the trial Joe escaped, some say with a little help from friends unscrewing the cell door hinges, and, in an act of theatrics, rode away on the magistrate's horse. Local people watched with amusement as troopers and Aboriginal trackers left each day to search his bush haunts. Joe just wanted to get on with his ordinary life at Moondyne Springs, and so was eventually caught near his camp and imprisoned for three years for jail breaking while still unconvicted. To house their prisoner, and with the likelihood of others, a prison was constructed in Newcastle.

On his release, Moondyne Joe obtained work as a charcoal burner and stockman, but within a year was charged with killing a bullock at Kelmscott with intent to steal the carcass. As Colonial Prisoner 8189, Joe was sentenced to 10 years of hard labour in Fremantle Prison. However, while in a work party on the Canning River, he took off for the hills with fellow prisoner David Evans. After a long and exhausting chase, the two men were recaptured in their sleep at Doodenanning.

## A SOCIAL BLOKE

Joe was a likeable rascal. He had a way with words, and violence was not part of his character. Magistrate Cowan of York handed down a comparatively light sentence of one year in irons, due to Joe's protesting his innocence of the original charge. After a short time he escaped again in July 1866 and headed towards the place he loved best, the rolling hills and plateau around the Avon River Valley.

By now, newspapers had given Joe the unenviable title of 'Bushranger'. Many a reader smirked as they read about his escapades, which were a great embarrassment to politicians and bureaucrats. Settlers who knew him frequently invited him in for a meal and some good-humoured company. After two months Joe was caught again and sentenced to a further six months in chains, only to escape once more from a work gang at Greenmount.

During his time on the run, Joe had



never hurt anyone and went out of his way to avoid violence. However, with a group of runaways, he broke into an old couple's hut and stole firearms and other goods. Moondyne Joe and Company, as the gang was dubbed, eluded police and continued to carry out robberies for a planned escape to South Australia. They even robbed the town store in Newcastle on the same night that the Governor was staying there.

The Perth Gazette glorified Joe's exploits to humiliate the Colony's unpopular Governor. Governor John Hampton came from Port Arthur in Tasmania and had a reputation for brutality in prison management. He was seen as trying to enforce a similar system in Western Australia. The people of the Colony did not like the inhumanities of the convict system and

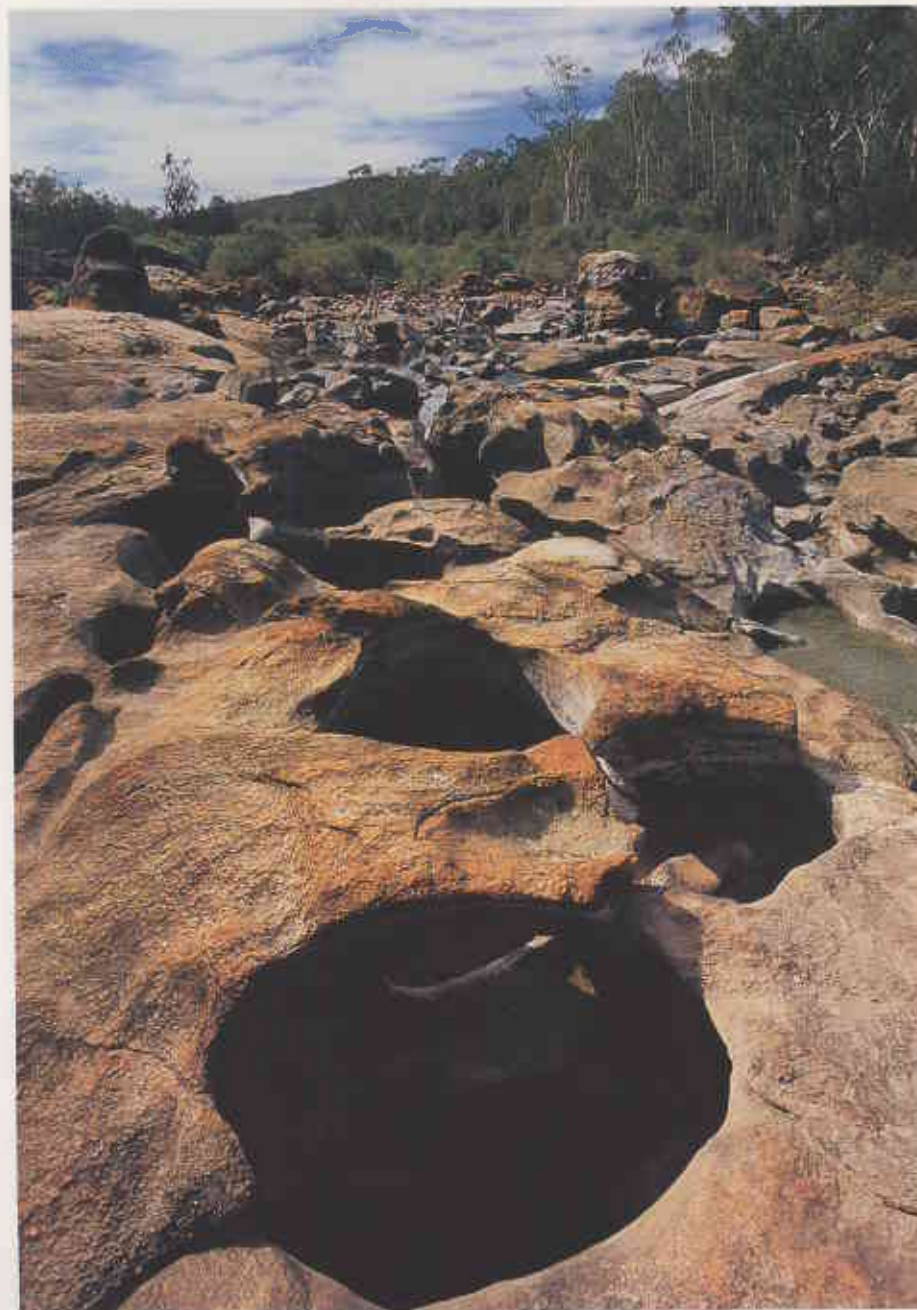
**Top:** River bottom boulders and melaleuca tea trees, which become obstacles to white-water competitors in the Avon Descent.

**Above:** Dry season pools on the Avon River where visitors picnic and enjoy the sanctity of the surrounding thickets. Here bushmen of the 1800s caught waterfowl, crustaceans and other bush animals for tucker.

so Joe became a vehicle for the newspaper to ridicule the Governor.

Within a month Joe was apprehended at Bodallin Soak, 320 kilometres east of Perth, and the 'notorious bushranger' was taken in chains to Fremantle Prison. Governor Hampton's son (made Comptroller of Prisons by his father) ordered the construction of a special escape-proof





cell within Fremantle Prison. The cell was lined with large jarrah railway sleepers. High on one wall was a tiny multi-barred window. A ringbolt, fixed to the centre floor, further restricted a prisoner in irons. The door was simply a sheet of flat heavy iron. During the construction of this cell, Joe was dressed in canvas prison clothes daubed with the government broad arrow and chained by the neck to a yard post. Mr Hampton assembled the inmates in front of this sorry sight and threatened them with similar punishment.

### HERO OR VILLAIN

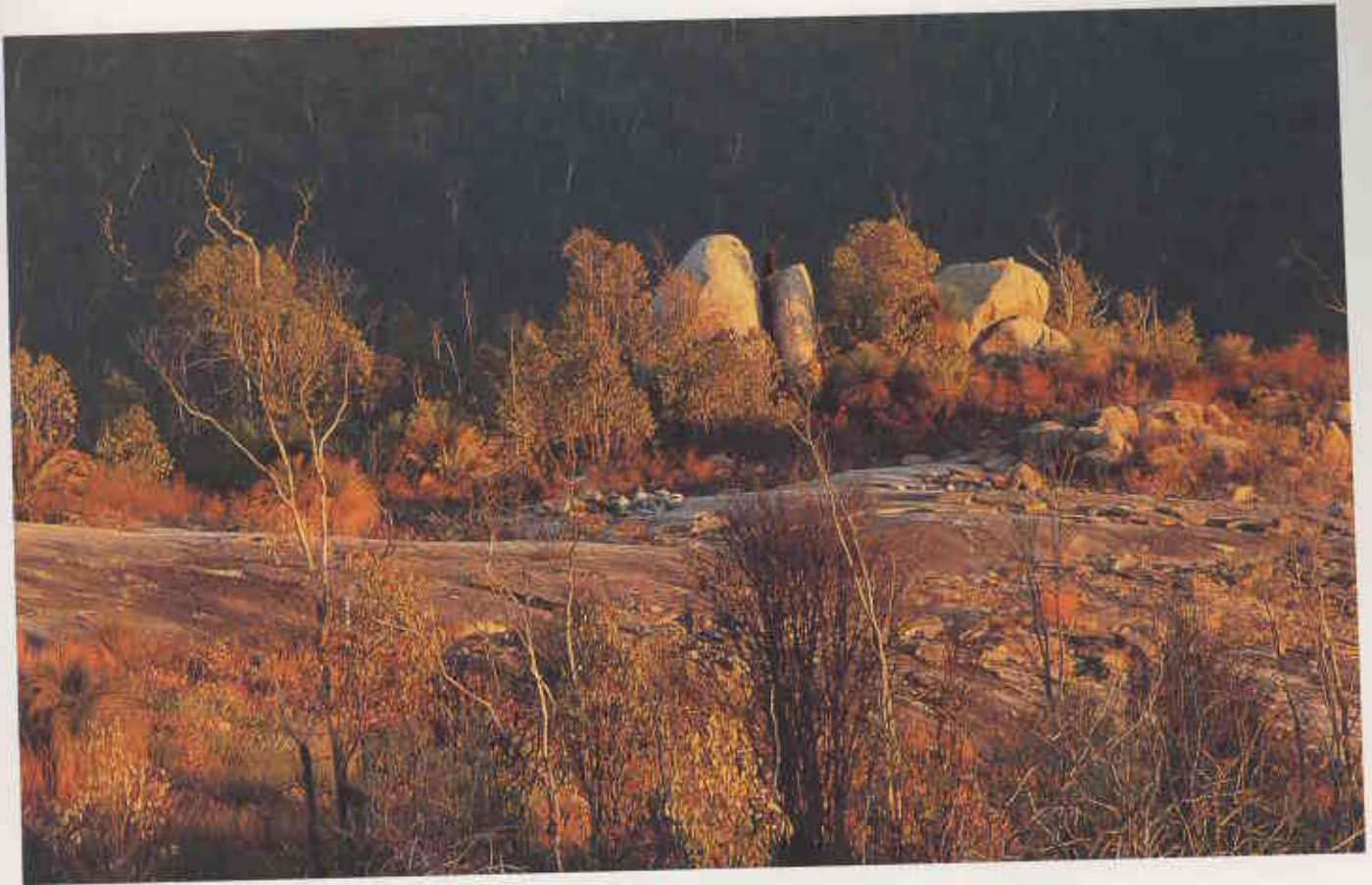
After a time, the prison surgeon and superintendent recommended that for the maintenance of good health, Joe be given a daily job of breaking rocks in a corner of the prison yard. Before long, his ingenuity and planning came to the fore once again. Joe started a rock pile between himself and the sentry and, at the same time, worked on a hole at the foot of the nearby wall. At inspection times and at the end of each day, a carefully shaped stone was replaced to camouflage the hole. On March 7, 1867, Joe made a scarecrow-like structure out of wire and sledgehammers. Using his shirt and hat, he propped the apparatus, which resembled his upper body, into the rock pile and hastily escaped through the hole. He fled into the adjoining backyard of the prison superintendent, out through his side gate and disappeared.

When told of the escape, the Governor fairly choked on his porridge, called in the military and the police, and offered (for the first time ever) a £20 reward from his own purse for the capture of Moondyne Joe, 'either dead or alive'. Joe had become a hero. The hotel bars and back alleys of the Colony echoed to many a rhyme and song. The press and the people believed he had earned his freedom and the knee-jerk

**Above left:** At Toodyay, the old Newcastle Gaol where visitors can now sit a while and feel the spirit of Moondyne Joe.  
Photo – Jiri Lochman

**Left:** Eroded rock riverbed, a 'moonscape' of ancient granite over which a wild winter river crashes to the plains below.





reaction of the Governor was ridiculed by all. Joe disappeared for nearly two years, probably back to his beloved Moondyne Hills where he could enjoy the peace of the bush and local friends. During this time the Hamptons left the country.

However, when passing through the lush pastures and wineries of the Swan Valley on his way to Perth, Joe stopped off at Mr Ferguson's unattended cellars at Houghton's Winery. Mr Ferguson unfortunately arrived a short time later with some policeman friends, to also sample a variety or two. When they entered the cellar, all were astonished when a 'wild man' leapt out of the darkness, the smell of port quite obvious. Joe was caught again, copping another 12 months in Fremantle Prison for sampling the wine and a further three years for the break and enter. He defended himself, as usual, and while behind bars, frequently wrote to the authorities protesting his innocence and requesting remissions. In all aspects of his protests he was both articulate and astute. During this stint in gaol, Joe withstood tremendous pressures to subdue him. He was exceedingly stubborn and artful in his resistance to incarceration. Eventually, the authorities realised there was little to be gained by imprisonment and sent him to Vasse,

where he worked as a timber cutter. Some time later he gained a pardon.

In 1872, Joe spent a short time in gaol, for some shady deal, and thereafter worked as an itinerant in many locations, from Fremantle to Coolgardie. For the rest of his life he had only a succession of minor offences recorded against him.

### DEATH DO US PART

Joseph Johns married Louisa Hearn, the widowed daughter of a navy warrant officer in Fremantle in 1879. The pair lived happily together, Joe working on the railway line, or in carpentry, as well as undertaking numerous other jobs. In 1891, the two joined the rush to the Goldfields at Southern Cross. Unfortunately, Louisa succumbed to one of the terrible epidemics rife in the eastern Goldfields at that time, and she died in 1893.

Joe was deeply affected by this loss and was never the same again. He returned to Perth, living in a small shack at Kelmscott, where he was constantly harassed by local children. Slowly he lost his friends, his money and his mind. Joe was found wandering the streets of South Perth by a policeman in January 1900 and ordered to the Mount Eliza invalid depot. Like

A granite ridge jutting into the river valley. Here, lizards and snakes sunbake during the day, while scorpions and other insects scuttle about during the night.

the Joe of old, he escaped repeatedly. From here he was placed in the Fremantle lunatic asylum (now the Fremantle Arts Museum), where he died of senile dementia in August 1900. There was at last, no thing and no man to impede the free spirit of Moondyne Joe.

Joseph Bolitho Johns lies beneath a slab in a paupers' grave in Fremantle Cemetery. His tombstone simply depicts his name, a pair of handcuffs and the Welsh word *rhyddid* meaning freedom.

Some say that if you stand quietly on the slopes of the Avon River Valley and listen you will hear the whisper of a ladies voice in the sheoaks. If you move a little closer to the river you may hear the groan of a tormented man among the granite outcrops. Some say, Joe is still there.

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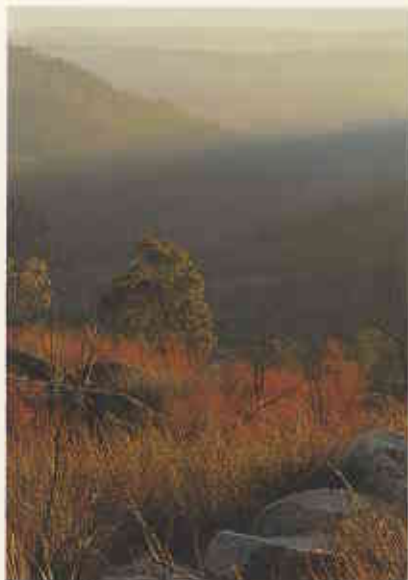
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# LANDSCOPE

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*This land, where the Avon River cuts through the Darling Range, was home to WA's most notorious bushranger. His story is on page 10.*



*Just when everyone thought it was extinct, this small mammal suddenly reappeared. See 'Dibblers' on page 28.*



*100,000 hectares of bluegums by the year 2000. Was it a realistic target? See 'From Blue sky to Blue Chip' on page 35.*



*'What about the Animals', on page 21, discusses early findings from the Kingston Study.*



*'Karla Wongi: Fire Talk', on page 48, is a Nyungar perspective on the use of fire in the south-west of WA.*

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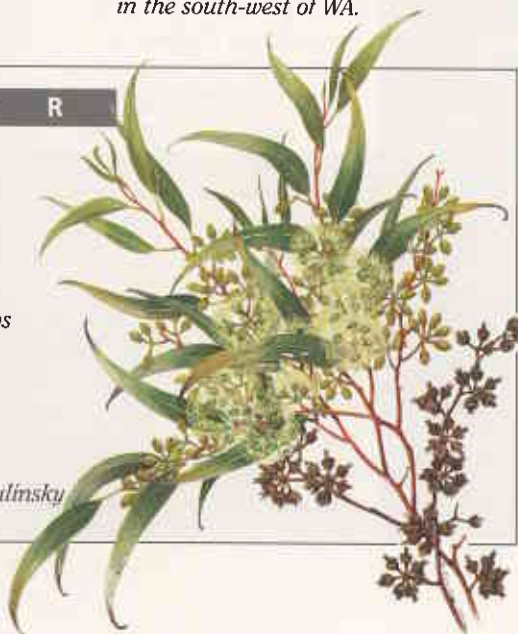
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*One of Western Australia's best-known woodlands may be under threat now, but research by CALMScience Division staff is playing a key role in safeguarding their future. See 'Small Steps to Save Salmon Gums', on page 17*

*Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky*



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