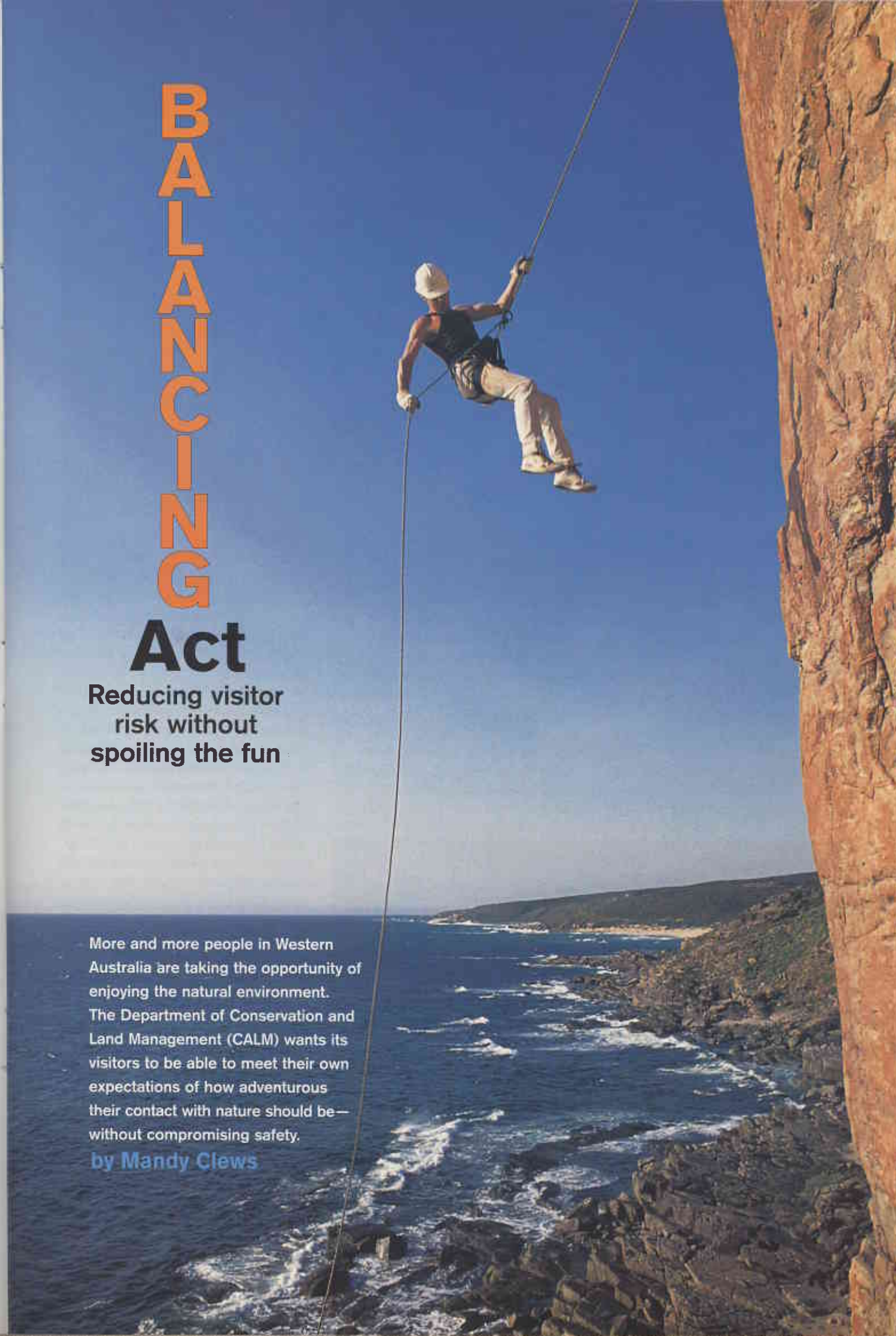
BALANCING Act

Reducing visitor risk without spoiling the fun



More and more people in Western Australia are taking the opportunity of enjoying the natural environment. The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) wants its visitors to be able to meet their own expectations of how adventurous their contact with nature should be—without compromising safety.

by Mandy Clews

It may seem wowserish to say so, but all recreational activity involves an element of risk. With one lapse of concentration, the in-line skater could dislocate a joint, the cyclist could suffer a head injury, the squash-player could end up with a black eye. Purely by chance, the surfer could be a shark's breakfast, the fisher a crocodile's dinner. But the fact of the matter is that most of us take responsibility to come to our chosen activity with some understanding of its safety issues. The ethic is in-built and well understood: there is no such thing as a risk-free environment. We weigh up the dangers every time we leave the house.

The same holds true for the bush. There were more than eight-and-a-half million visits to CALM-managed areas in 1998–99, increasing from just over eight million in the preceding year and six-and-a-half million the year before that. This volume of people, together with growing public mobility and the increasing size of the CALM-managed estate, means some degree of mishap and injury is inevitable.

With its comprehensive visitor risk management program, CALM is aiming to maximise the enjoyment for its growing number of visitors while minimising risk.

The program includes staff training, public education, and thorough procedures for identifying risk and intervening to reduce it in visitor areas. Under CALM's risk management policy, recreation areas in CALM-managed lands and waters should be checked regularly for natural hazards, and buildings, access structures and facilities should be inspected to ensure they are sturdy, sound, and properly maintained. The policy also involves careful documentation of risk assessments and incidents so that the organisation's performance in risk management can be monitored, evaluated and reviewed. Perhaps most importantly, visitors themselves are informed by signs, brochures and contact with CALM staff about safety issues in the area they are visiting. In addition, CALM has developed its risk management approach into a nationally accredited training package that has attracted the interest of a number of municipal authorities and other outside agencies around Australia.

Previous page
Abseiling the Biljedup Cliffs, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park. Adventure outdoor recreation is becoming increasingly popular with the community.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

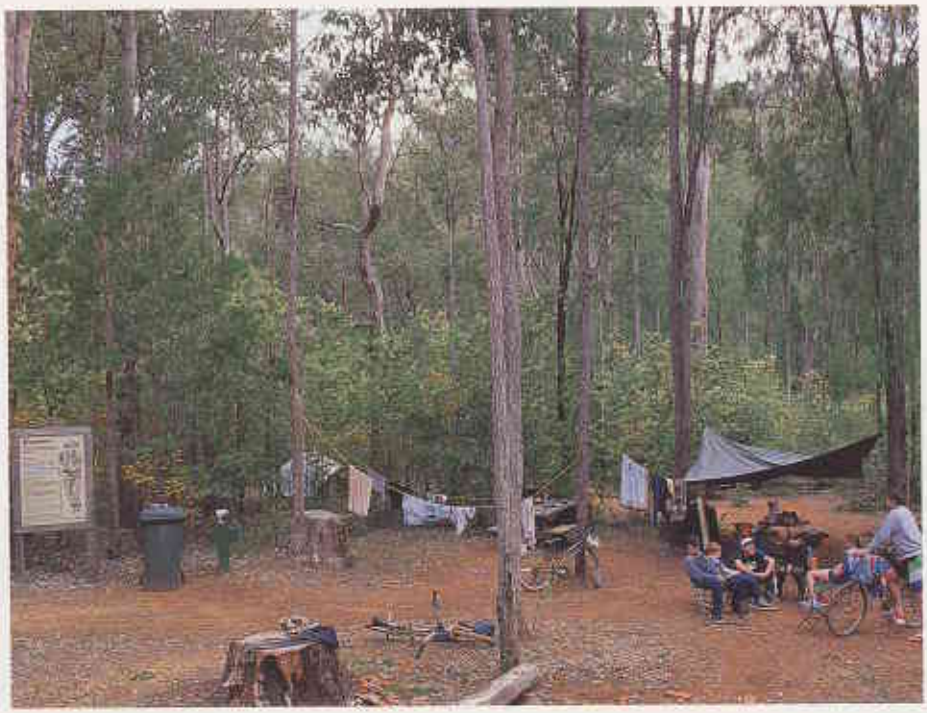
Left: All visitors to natural areas are exposed to some level of risk.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

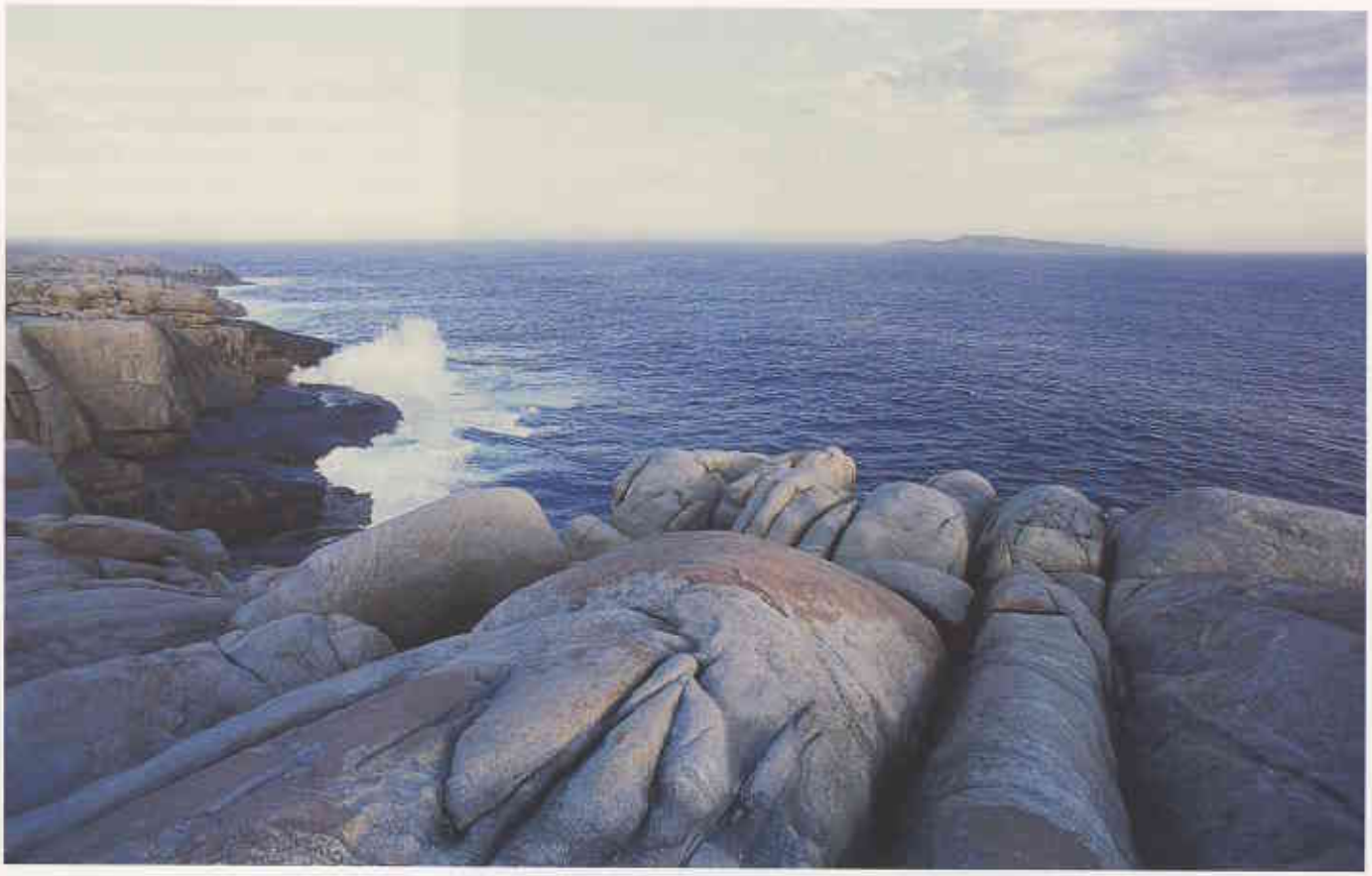
Below: Mountain bike group camping at Honeymoon Pool, on the Collie River. Visits to natural areas can range in duration from less than an hour to several days.
Photo – Gordon Roberts/CALM

LOPPING FOR LIFE

A recent example of the visitor risk management program in practice was work undertaken at Honeymoon Pool on the Collie River, a popular camping area which attracts more than 30,000 visitors a year. In the summer of 1997 CALM recreation site planners noticed a number of trees with dead limbs in their crowns that posed a potential danger to visitors. Staff immediately undertook a thorough identification and assessment of the risks posed by these limbs, which are grimly known in forest-worker vernacular as 'widow-makers'. Trees were assessed for the degree of dead, rotten, hollowed or termite-damaged wood in their crowns and limbs and the extent to which they leaned over the picnic areas and campsites. It was decided in the process that the risk of injury from a falling branch at the site was extremely high, and required immediate action.

There were three possible interventions to address the issue: the recreation area could be left in its natural state and permanently closed to the public; there could be a combination of closure and relocation of some campsites and removal of extremely hazardous trees and limbs; or the hazardous trees and branches could be removed altogether. Because of Honeymoon Pool's popularity and its long history of public use, the latter





The slippery rocks and pounding surf of Torndirrup National Park have claimed 18 lives since 1973.
Photo – Bill Belson/Lochman Transparencies

option seemed best. The site was temporarily closed while hazardous limbs and trees were removed. One particularly hazardous area was permanently closed.

CALM took care during the operation to ensure that people were aware of the issues and the approach being taken. Campers, local shires, tourist bureaux, the police, the South West Development Commission, other accommodation providers, the local Aboriginal community and the media were all briefed about the operation and the planned period of closure of the site, and clear warning signs were erected. Generally, the public response was appreciative and supportive of the exercise.

The Honeymoon Pool project was instructive to CALM in a number of ways. It highlighted the practical importance of identifying tree hazards by inspecting both below and above the canopy, and the need to maintain detailed records of all risk management activities. It re-affirmed the obligation to ensure the public is well-informed, via the media and on-site signage, and the imperative for staff to be vigilant in routinely checking for, reporting, and removing hazards that pose an unacceptable risk to visitors. Finally, Honeymoon Pool emphasised the importance of undertaking regular inspections for hazards at all of CALM's recreation areas.

DANGEROUS COAST

Since 1973 the slippery rocks and pounding surf of Torndirrup National Park on the southern coastline have claimed 18 lives. In one instance, a tourist drowned after venturing out to the watermark at the Park's Blowholes site to try to get a view of the water flowing in. He either slipped and lost his footing on the slimy rocks, or was washed off the rocks by a big wave. He had by all accounts ignored both the sign-posted warnings and the verbal admonitions of the party he was travelling with when he climbed down to the seaward side of the Blowholes. The unsuccessful effort to rescue him and the recovery of his body from the water put the lives of another 20 State Emergency Service volunteers and police at risk.

The danger of the Southern Ocean with its high swells and so-called 'king waves', its ravaging currents and rips, is legendary in Western Australia. But there is an unwavering tendency for, on average, at least one person per year to break the rules. Despite the warning signs, they take a life-threatening risk, and in most cases do not make it back to shore alive. Authorities have wrestled with the perennial issue of coastal safety for decades.

At one time it was mooted that anchor points with life-preservers could be placed at strategic points along the southern coastline. While the idea may have some merit, it also has some disadvantages. A major one is that anchored life-preservers may give risk-takers a false sense of security, and encourage them to be even less inhibited about clambering around the treacherous rocks. In the end it was decided that life-preservers could send the wrong message to the public and might lead to even more loss of life.

Instead, CALM along with other authorities including Police, Sea Search and Rescue, and local government is concentrating on an ongoing campaign of public education. Unpredictable waves and slippery rocks are not a hazard that can be removed; therefore, the way to minimise risk is to

ensure that people are aware of the serious danger of getting too close to the water, through sign-posts, brochures on site and in tourist bureaux, media messages, and verbal warnings from rangers and tour operators. Even if a few people are still foolish or reckless enough to ignore the warnings and pay the price, it is hoped the awareness campaigns will turn the public consciousness and respect for the perils of their coastal environment into a lasting wisdom: one that will keep irresponsible behaviour and dire consequences to a minimum.

ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN

In assessing sites for risk, CALM staff need to consider a range of factors. These include the probability of an adverse event occurring (ranging from practically impossible to almost certain), the exposure (a combination of frequency and duration of visits), and the consequences of the event if it were to happen. From these considerations, a particular hazard can be given a 'risk score' which determines the level and urgency of intervention required to manage it.

There is a grab-bag of management actions that can be taken to address an identified hazard. These range from providing warning signs and promotional material to modifying or removing hazards, and finally, in the most severe cases, closing the site, a measure which has only rarely been required in Western Australia. A low-scoring hazard, having limited likelihood and mild consequences, will require the minimum of prevention

Top: Tourists at Joffe Falls lookout, Karijini National Park. Structures are provided to ensure enjoyment of wonderful views.
Photo – Bill Bachman

Centre left: Signposts warn visitors of specific risks at sites.
Photo – Bill Bachman

Left: Ancient Empire Trail, Walpole-Nornalup National Park. Boardwalks are provided to guide visitors through the area while ensuring minimal environmental impact.
Photo – Michael James/CALM

measures. In contrast, an extreme hazard, with high likelihood and severe consequences, will require the highest level of intervention.

Prevention may be the key to successful risk management, but a certain amount of misadventure is unavoidable. These cases require a quick and effective response, and CALM staff are trained in managing incidents. First and foremost they must see to first aid and other medical assistance, before reporting the situation and evacuating the victim if required. Appropriate remedial action must then be taken at the site, followed by investigation of the incident, including taking statements from witnesses. The incident must then be thoroughly documented and followed up.

PARTNERSHIP

The way in which we assess risk, and our efforts either to seek or to avoid risky situations, are ultimately a personal choice. Most people do not want to be wrapped in cotton wool when they visit the bush. For many, spraining an ankle or grazing a knee is part of the experience, like a badge earned in meeting the challenge of scaling a hill or abseiling down a cliff face. People should be able to seek adventure in the natural environment, without finding sites closed or 'sterilised' to remove all challenges. They should, however, be fully informed of the particular characteristics of a location that might make it dangerous, and they must take responsibility for their own safety in situations that they judge carry an acceptable level of risk for them.

At the same time, development of facilities at recreation areas to enable ease of public access carries a responsibility to ensure that structures such as car parks, bridges, boardwalks and guard-rails are built to a high safety standard. This infrastructure is like an invitation, a welcome mat to the site, and people use it in good faith. For this reason, CALM adheres to national and international standards of safety in the design, construction and maintenance of these facilities.

CALM takes the view in all aspects of land management that the public are partners. The ideal is for visitors to be able to enjoy the environment safely to their own level of ability and experience. CALM's ethic is to enhance the community ownership and care for its environment through ensuring that visitors respect the environment, that they are prepared, and that they are responsible: for themselves, for others, and for the environment itself. From construction and design standards for its infrastructure, to risk assessment and hazard removal, to safety information, to bush survival training, CALM and its partner, the community, have got visitor safety covered.

BEING PREPARED

When the now-celebrated American adventurer Robert Bogucki set off into the Great Sandy Desert in July 1999 he broke all the rules. Thinking he could make the journey across the sand dunes to Fitzroy Crossing on a push-bike, he was apparently not fully aware of the risk he was taking. Nor did he inform any local authorities of his planned route. He survived and was rescued, against considerable odds.

But the happy ending to Mr Bogucki's story is not, as is popularly held, due entirely to chance. Nor was he completely unprepared. One thing he had in abundance was an extraordinary knowledge of survival techniques, as well as outstanding physical fitness and a remarkable mental attitude. These are attributes that CALM encourages in all visitors to remote and rugged country, not only because it improves their safety if conditions become adverse, but also because it affirms their respect for their environment, and enhances their enjoyment of their bush experience.

For more than ten years CALM has run courses in bushcraft and outback safety for people heading bush. Run by well-known bush survival expert Bob Cooper, the courses equip people with the skills, knowledge, and attitude to ensure that they enjoy themselves, safely and with minimal environmental impact, on their bush holiday. Sessions focus on planning, map reading and navigating, low-impact camping, water procurement and management, and recognising edible and toxic plants. They culminate in a weekend camping expedition to apply the theory in the field.

Further information about the CALM courses can be obtained from WA Naturally, 47 Henry Street, Fremantle. Ph (08) 9430 8600.

Karijini National Park. For more than ten years CALM has run courses in bushcraft and outback safety for people heading bush.
Photo – Bill Bachman

Mandy Clews is a freelance writer and regular contributing editor to *LANDSCOPE*. She can be contacted on (08) 9430 7032.

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How many seals or sea lions are there around WA's coasts? See 'A Tale of Two Seals' on page 42.

"What I wasn't prepared for was the magic of the experience." See 'Desert Impressions' on page 35 for the story of a LANDSCOPE *Expedition.*

The malleefowl has declined to 46 per cent of its former range. Read about the combined effort to save it on page 17.

Enjoy the WA environment—and don't get hurt! See 'Balancing Act' on page 23.

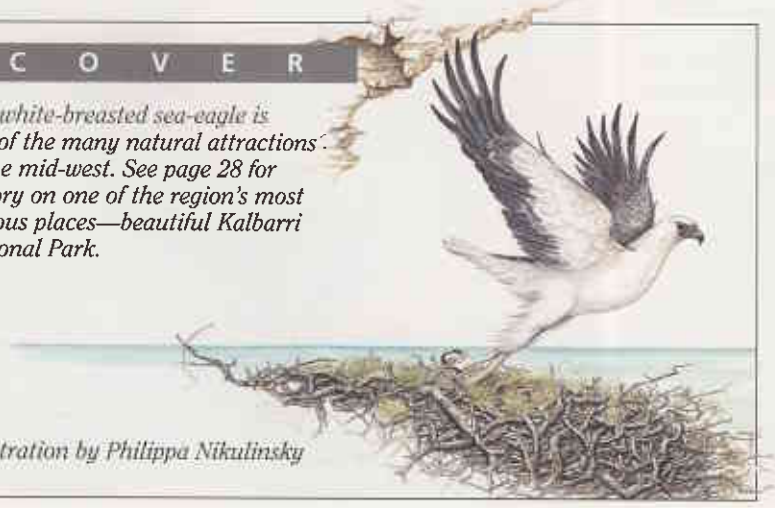
Traditional owners are working with CALM and other agencies to manage the land. See page 10.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

The white-breasted sea-eagle is one of the many natural attractions of the mid-west. See page 28 for a story on one of the region's most famous places—beautiful Kalbarri National Park.



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