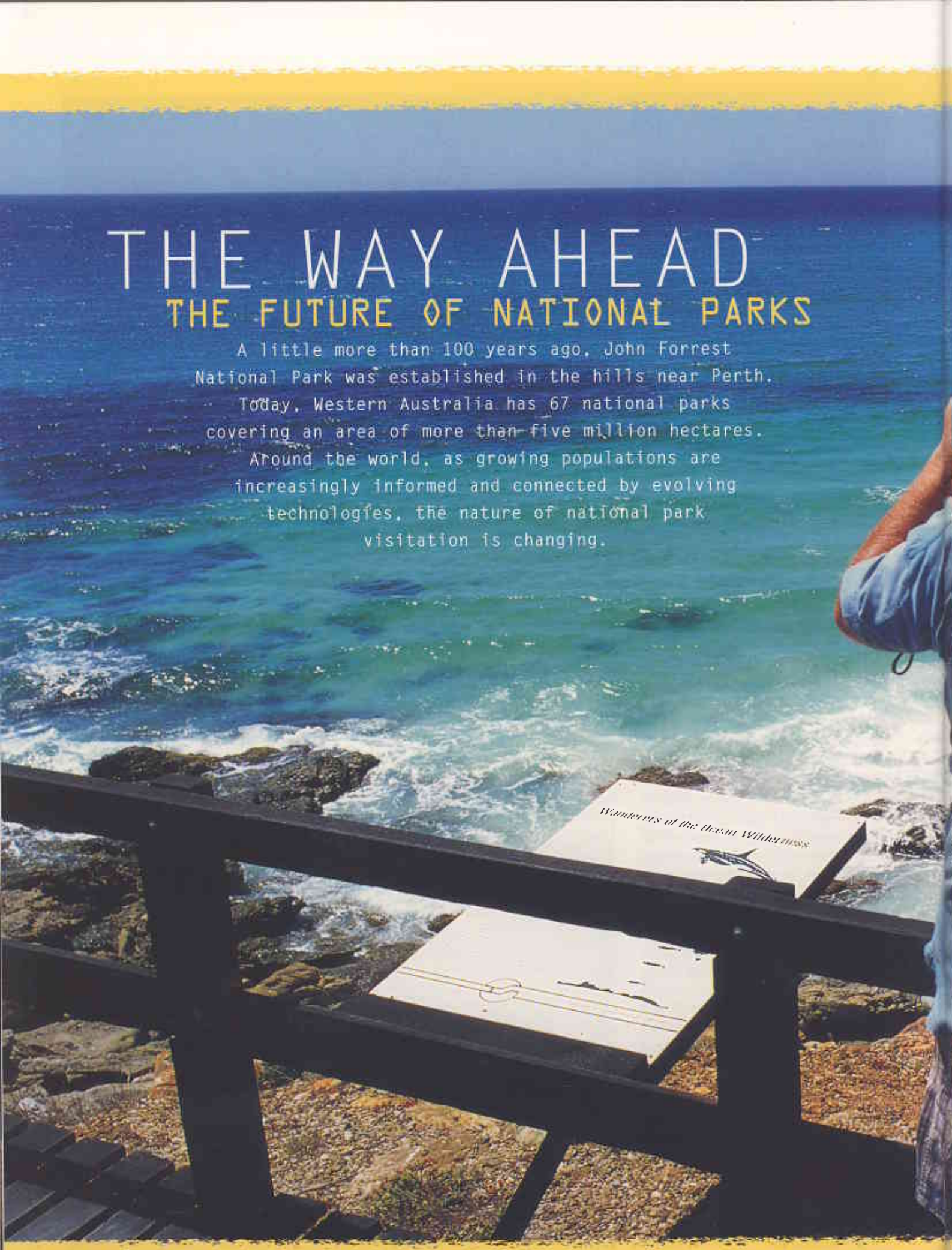
THE WAY AHEAD

THE FUTURE OF NATIONAL PARKS

A little more than 100 years ago, John Forrest National Park was established in the hills near Perth. Today, Western Australia has 67 national parks covering an area of more than five million hectares. Around the world, as growing populations are increasingly informed and connected by evolving technologies, the nature of national park visitation is changing.



by Mandy Clews, Jim Sharp and Wayne Schmidt

'Getting away from it all' used to be the term used for going on holiday. But the consciousness of the world's tourists has changed. Increasingly, we understand ourselves to be part of the natural environment rather than separate from it. As the explosion in electronic communication technology puts a virtual world onto our television screens and computer monitors, we have an increasing need to get outside and reconnect with the real environment. The purpose of recreation in natural areas has shifted from 'getting away from it all' to 'getting back into it all'. Meanwhile, we now have a global menu of natural areas virtually at our fingertips to stimulate and tempt our interests in travel and exploration.

INTERNATIONAL PARKS

The concept of national parks was realised in 1872 with the proclamation of Yellowstone, in the United States (see Places of National Importance, page 17). The term 'national park' is now an internationally recognised concept. Australia's peak conservation management bodies operate at the State level of government. As a result, Western Australia's 67 national parks are managed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM).

Areas are considered for national park status partly on the basis of what they represent in the way of natural features, such as plants, animals or geological formations, that might be unique, rare or endangered. As national park management has evolved around the world, WA's national parks fit more and more into a global mosaic of thousands of protected areas. In our management of national parks and other conservation areas, we are increasingly part of a larger whole. This means we are conserving and making accessible our natural heritage, not only on behalf of the Western Australian community, but also on behalf of the world.

Previous page
A boardwalk allows tourists to watch whales in the Southern Ocean off Point Ann in the Fitzgerald River National Park.

Left: The latest technology in engineering, takes people right into the canopy of the giant tingle forest.

Below: National parks offer a wealth of experiences. Here, a group is exploring the gorges of Karijini National Park.
Photos – Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

A GROWING CONCERN

Around the world, the size of the conservation estate has grown five-fold since the 1970s, and visitor numbers have increased at a similar rate. While the growth in area covered by national parks is now showing signs of slowing, the increase in visitation is not. The world's population is growing and becoming ever more mobile. This year, it is expected that a billion people will travel outside their home country. Environmental consciousness is also on the rise, with tens of millions of people visiting the world's national parks each year.

Western Australia is no exception to this trend. Visits to CALM-managed lands and waters grew from 5.8 million in 1994–95 to 8.7 million in 1998–99. The number of CALM-licensed tour operators visiting national parks in WA

also grew, from 60 in 1995 to 320 this year. Meanwhile, the amount of money available for managing national parks has struggled to keep pace with the growth in their area and visitation. The relative decline in funding for national park administration over the decades is a world-wide phenomenon, and requires creative management strategies. For some years now, national parks around the world, WA included, have been developing a system of charging fees to visitors. But the 'user-pays' principle is not always popular and does not address the philosophical view that because the conservation estate belongs to the global community, it should be centrally funded and freely available for the enjoyment of that community.

Fortunately, there has been a coinciding trend around the world for local communities to take over more and more responsibility for their national parks. In WA, many national parks have Advisory Committees with strong representation from local communities. Several national parks also have independent 'Friends' organisations. In addition, CALM has a register of more than 3,600 volunteers around the State who may be called upon to assist in park conservation programs.

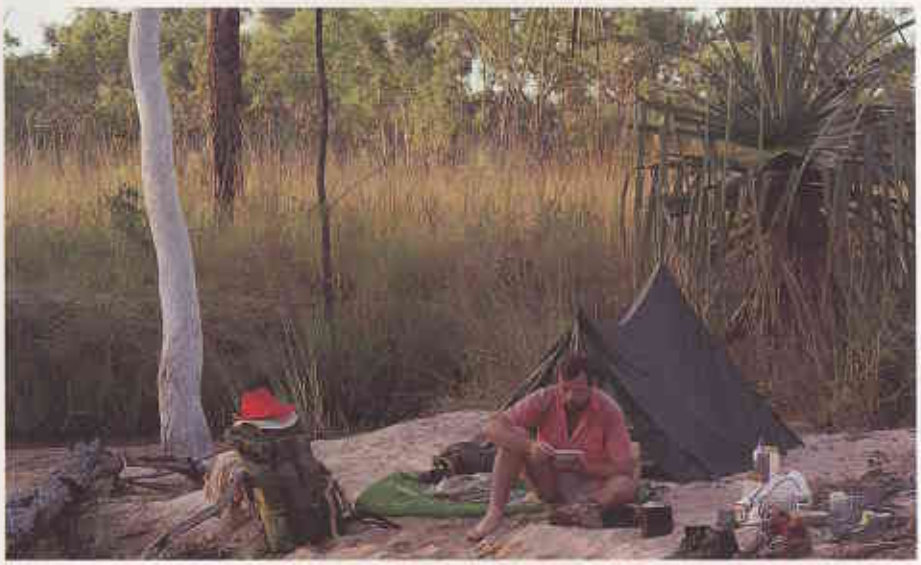
Local involvement in management of national parks looks set to increase further. This arrangement will serve local interests in a number of ways. For example, it will maintain and strengthen the cultural and spiritual associations between communities and their immediate natural environment. Local communities also have an economic interest in maintaining nearby natural features that attract visitors: more visitors to national parks means corresponding growth in service industries and employment in nearby towns. In coming years, CALM will increasingly coordinate 'combined management', where local authorities, non-government organisations, local businesses and tour operators carry out care-taking programs that will involve both practical and financial support.

MANAGING PEOPLE

Another trend that is evident is the greater diversity of experiences being sought by park visitors. Some of these expectations are in direct conflict with each other. For example, a growing number of people are seeking a 'wilderness' experience, and don't wish to see any evidence of human presence. At the same time, more and more people with limited mobility (such as people who are aging or people with disabilities) are visiting natural areas, and depend upon infrastructure like boardwalks or ramps. There is an increasing need to cater for a range of experiences with different levels of accessibility, and to let people know what to expect at each location.

Making a site safer and more accessible by building infrastructure is known as 'site hardening', and coming years will see more of it in WA, kept in careful balance with preserving 'naturalness' of sites. There are already a number of examples in place. At Karijini National Park, the spectacle of converging gorges at Oxer's Lookout draws thousands of people each year. With greater visitor pressure, the precipice was eroding and posed considerable risk of people toppling over the edge. A fenced metal enclosure has now been built at the site so people can enjoy the awesome views in relative safety. At the same time, more adventurous people are free to enjoy, at their own risk, the large and equally spectacular areas of gorge country that remain mostly untouched.

Hardening a site can minimise human risk, while protecting natural areas from the impact of increasing visitor numbers. The Tree Top Walk in Walpole-Nornalup National Park takes visitors along a supported metal ramp through the canopy of the tingle forest, 35 to 40 metres above the ground. It was designed and built after the giant tingle



Top: The last five years has seen an explosion in the numbers of tour operators licensed to visit national parks.
Photo – Jay Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

Above: With the world changing so fast, national parks still give people a chance to experience the wilderness.
Photo – Marie Lochman

trees began to show signs of distress. The ground around their roots had been trampled following decades of uncontrolled visitor pressure. The Tree Top Walk is wheelchair-accessible and allows large numbers of people of all abilities to view the marvels of the tingle forest from a whole new perspective, with minimal impact on the ecosystem.

In the not too distant past, the idea of an attraction like the Tree Top Walk would have been unimaginable. Today, it is state-of-the-art, but in a few years, it might be run of the mill. So what kinds of attractions can we expect to see in the future? A public competition for a 'forest icon', now under way, has produced some imaginative ideas. Suggestions included sculpture parks, laser light shows, river trails, a virtual tree, an Aboriginal interpretation centre and many variations on getting into the canopy of the forest such as lifts, gondolas, flying foxes, monorails and sky rails. In the next phase of the project, expressions of interest will be called for professional groups or other interested parties to put forward proposals to develop further, any one, part of, or a combination of the 71 concepts received in the public competition.

NATURE-BASED

As environmental consciousness continues to rise around the world, tourism operators have observed a shift away from comfort-intensive mass package touring of the 50s, 60s and 70s, towards more individually enriching contact with the natural environment. Today's park visitors are more likely to seek a highly individual experience in a remote and 'unspoiled' environment, and will often pay a premium price for it. For example, young, fit tourists who use basic backpacker accommodation at $20 a night, will readily pay $100 or more for a 20-minute joy-flight over the Bungle Bungle Range in Purnululu National Park, or to swim with whale sharks in the Ningaloo Marine Park.

In 1997, WA responded to this trend by developing a Nature-Based Tourism Strategy. The strategy prescribes five key elements to be included in any nature-based tourism enterprise: sustainability; significant natural and/or cultural components; education and interpretation; the involvement of and/or benefit to the local community; and consumer satisfaction. The State has hundreds of tour operators offering varying levels of experience, including rugged physical adventure, comfortable 'safari-style' tours or simple transport to and from 'sites'. The strategy gives them clear guidelines to provide consistent nature-based experiences that satisfy their customers' expectations.

ANCIENT AND MODERN

Another worldwide trend that is apparent in WA is an increasing recognition of the important role indigenous people can play in nature conservation. Many visitors to national parks are seeking a cultural experience. They would like to learn about the beliefs, connections and knowledge of indigenous people who have traditional ties with these areas and expect to see indigenous knowledge and values reflected in management.

Aboriginal people are increasingly becoming involved in the management of national parks with which they have traditional connections. When the management plan for Karijini National Park was finalised, it represented the State's first formal cooperative management agreement. The Karijini

Above left: CALM-licensed tour operators offer a wide range of activities and experiences in our national parks.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman transparencies

Left: Availability of modern 4WD vehicles give more people access to national parks.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Park Council represents the local Aboriginal communities in decisions made about park management. Moreover, seven of the nine staff at the park are Aboriginal. In various parts of the State, CALM is developing strategies to boost recruitment and training of Aboriginal people in natural areas.

Opportunities for 'cultural tourism' abound in WA's national parks. In a trend that will continue, CALM is encouraging cultural tourism enterprises through its Aboriginal Tourism, Education and Training Unit. The unit has established two pilot projects, an Aboriginal Heritage Walk Tour in Fremantle and the 'Balga Mia Village' in Yanchep National Park. Other initiatives are being developed with communities in the central desert and south-west regions of the State.

THE AGE OF THE MICROCHIP

Travel planning has been one of the biggest growth areas of Internet use. Do-it-yourself, online tourists can now find information about places they want to visit, and book their own nature-based tours, flights and accommodation. NatureBase (CALM's website at www.naturebase.net) puts WA's natural attractions on the screens of the world's computers. NatureBase provides timely and up-to-date information on most of the State's national parks, marine parks and other recreation areas. It also provides searchable online databases from which visitors can select one or more national parks or nature-based tour operators that meet their individual needs.

Many parks and recreation areas around the world have touch screen kiosks, but parks of the near future may have consoles capable of downloading park information, walktrails and daily events directly to palm-held computers, or delivering information by wireless link directly to your vehicle's on-board computer. Link this with increasingly inexpensive GPSs (Global Positioning Systems) and you could plan your entire trip and let the vehicle's computer be your on-board personal tour guide.

CALM is already investigating putting Internet terminals in key visitor centres to allow visitors to send and receive emails or to plan the next stage of their holiday.

Above: Today, park visitors are often prepared to pay a lot of money for a special experience.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

Right: In the future it should be possible to download park information to palmtop computers.

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

While it is important to respond to trends, an equally important management strategy is to steer them. Part of the national park ethos is to educate and to engage interest and appreciation, rather than passively provide and maintain natural areas for recreation. Perhaps the most significant program addressing the future of national park management in Western Australia is located near our first national park, John Forrest.

The Hills Forest program takes primary school-age children on excursions into the jarrah forest ecosystem, complementing the Education Department curriculum to teach young people about the environment and how to care for it. Children learn vital bush skills as well as scientific facts about their natural heritage. The environmental consciousness that is fostered through the program is an investment in the future. The young people who benefit from the Hills Forest program are, after all, the next generation of custodians for our national parks and all that they represent.

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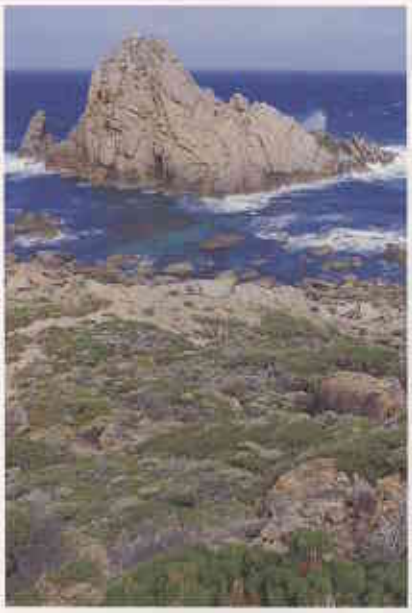
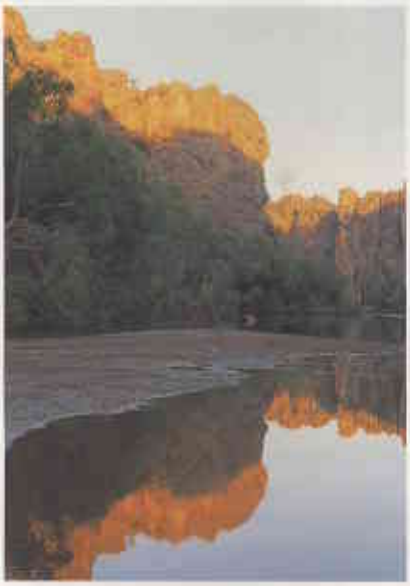


Sugarloaf Rock is just one of the many features that make Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park the most visited park in WA. (See page 10.)

Premier Park: John Forrest National Park is Western Australia's oldest park, celebrating its centenary year. (See page 22.)

Pinnacle of Parks: These unusual formations make Nambung National Park well known the world over. (See page 36.)



Windjana Gorge National Park holds important clues to the evolution of fish. See 'Old Fossils' on page 28.

William Bay National Park displays a miniature version of karri forest flora. (See page 42.)

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

With 67 national parks spread across the State, park rangers are often the first contact that visitors have with the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM). Apart from providing visitors with information and guidance, they perform a vital role in the day-to-day management of their local environment.

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