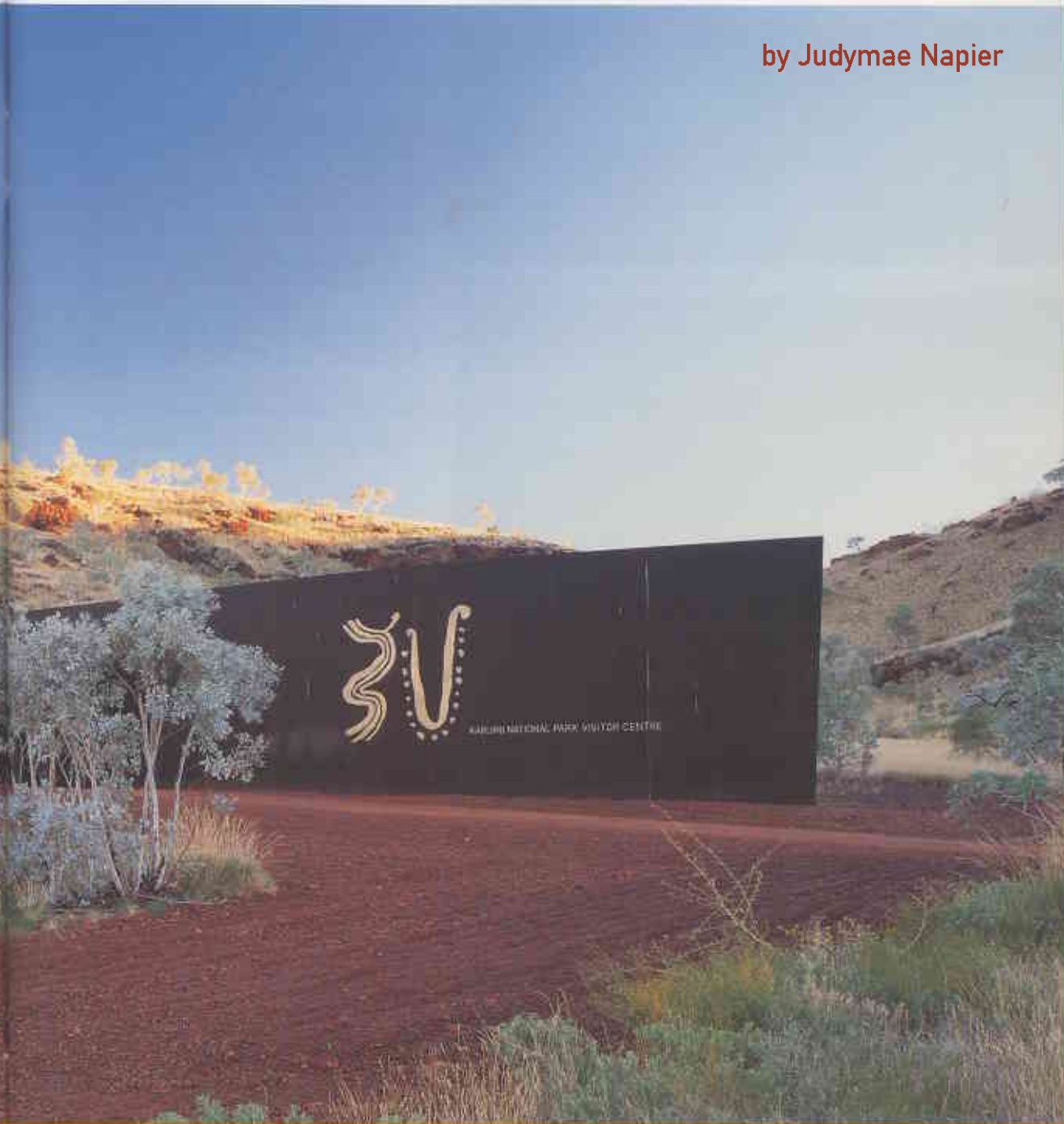


by Judymae Napier



A new, inspiring visitor centre at Karijini National Park is helping to meet visitor demands in one of the State's most remote and spectacular national parks.

Karijini calling

Karijini National Park, in the heart of the Pilbara region, is a significant international nature-based and cultural tourism destination. In a landscape as old as time, it offers dramatic scenery, natural beauty and adventures galore. Walk trails and lookouts provide fantastic opportunities to see and be part of this unique area.

The new Karijini National Park Visitor Centre is another jewel in the crown of a truly majestic place. Like the gorges, it too has secrets to reveal for those prepared to take the time and the journey.

THE BEGINNING

Through the efforts of the Karijini Economic Development Group—comprising the Pilbara Development Commission, Department of Conservation

and Land Management, Karijini Aboriginal Corporation, Aboriginal Economic Development Office and the Shire of Ashburton—a temporary visitor centre (housed in a large marquee) was established in the park in 1994. The initial proposal from the Karijini Aboriginal Corporation was to sell artefacts from a caravan. The marquee was an idea that arose from a concept by the Department of Conservation and Land Management's Recreation and Landscape branch for a 'canvas' structure for a visitor centre at Kalbarri National Park some years before.

The marquee was in place for six years and was open to the public from April to October. It was destroyed once in a cyclone, but, overall, came through remarkably well, with a bit of patching along the way. The marquee was in two



sections. It included a public area consisting of displays, a one-bookcase library, a two-chair video viewing area and a shop. A smaller section at the back of the marquee was a combined kitchen, meeting room and storage area. Staff used the public pit toilets adjacent to the carpark and lived in caravans behind the marquee, hidden from view by vegetation and shade cloth screens. More than 40 Aboriginal staff trained and worked in the temporary visitor centre.

THE TRANSITION

Planning for the establishment of a permanent centre began in 1995. The first application for Commonwealth funds was rejected. The second included the production of a homemade video featuring Karijini Aboriginal Corporation Chairperson Slim Parker and wildlife identity Harry Butler (then Chair of the PDC). The Karijini Economic Development Group took the video to Canberra for its screen debut and funding was approved. The proposal was supported by the Western Australian Government as one of the highest priorities for tourism development in the Pilbara region.

The permanent visitor centre was a joint initiative of the Pilbara Development Commission, the Department of Conservation and Land



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Main: Karijini Visitor Centre.

Photo – John Gollings

Insets from top: The goanna, *Varanus panoptes rubidu*.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Hammersley Gorge.

Photo – Chris Garnett

Part of the exterior wall of the visitor centre.

Photo – John Gollings

Above left: Termite mound in Karijini National Park.

Photo – Chris Garnett

Left: The interior of the marquee that served as a temporary visitor centre.

Photo – Judy Daily



Above: The goanna, *Varanus panoptes rubidus*, for which the Banyjima name is kurrumanthu, inspired the shape of the visitor centre.

Photo – Jiri Lochman



Right: Aerial view of the Karijini Visitor Centre.

Bottom right: Labels and panels interpret the wildflowers and wildlife of the park.

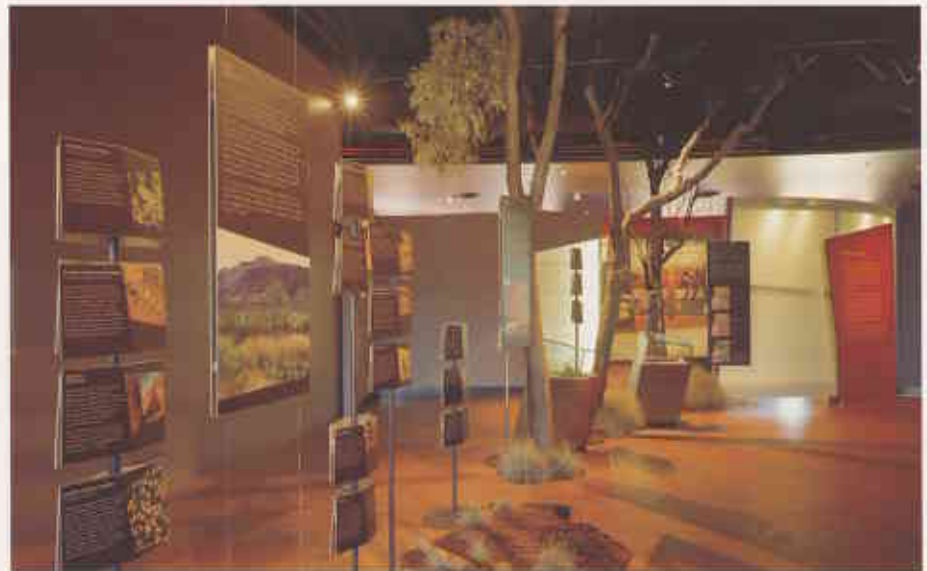
Photo – John Gollings

Management and the Karijini Aboriginal Corporation. The ongoing project was a major focus of the Karijini Park Council, which consists of representatives from the three Aboriginal language groups whose homelands include the park: the Banyjima, Yinhawanga and Kurrma people. The council provides a valuable forum for discussing park issues and developing policies in relation to Aboriginal interests in the park. Over the next five years, every aspect of the visitor centre, from its design down to the wording of text on labels, would be discussed and sometimes debated, until a consensus was reached.

Woodhead International BDH were the architects and project managers. WA Company, Wylie and Skene Pty Ltd constructed the centre, and the interpretive displays were designed and developed by David Lancashire Design, a Melbourne-based company.

The design of the building represents a goanna moving through the country and is described in a statement from the Martitidja Banyjima people, thus:

“The concept behind the design is to represent the movement of the people from the past and into the future. The tail symbolises a history that needs to be understood, acknowledged and left behind as we move forward. The head symbolises the future direction of the traditional owners in the management of environmental, conservational and commercial developments in Karijini National Park. Aboriginal law and



culture is represented in the guts (or stomach), which symbolises the spiritual life given by the creator. This is expressed through the importance of the relationship between the people and the land.”

The objectives of the visitor centre are to interpret the natural and cultural history of the area to enhance visitors’ experiences, and to provide up-to-date information and cautionary advice so they can make informed choices about exploring the park. It provides an opportunity for visitors to meet and speak with local Aboriginal people and learn about their association with the land. The centre provides employment opportunities for Aboriginal people and is a venue from which other Aboriginal tourism ideas can be explored and developed.

The high, weathered steel walls of the visitor centre mimic the sheer-sided gorges that are a feature of the park.

Like the gorge walls, they feel the force of the Pilbara’s summer sun, which proved to be quite an issue when initial discussions on building materials took place. However, forethought and originality won the day, and the use of steel as the material has resulted in the centre blending so well with its surrounds that it is not obvious until you actually arrive in the carpark.

But the building also had to be designed for the fire-prone environment in which it stands. It is remote from the park headquarters and ranger’s residence, and had to be able to withstand the fires that are a regular feature of the area—often associated with lightning strikes, particularly during the summer months. The construction materials, the lack of openings and minimal places to trap debris all help to reduce the threat of fire entering or damaging the building. Hose reels permit hoses to cover all external parts of the building and there is also the

provision for foam to be used with the hose reels. The forethought given to the fire environment is rare, if not unique, in the design of these types of facilities.

THE THEME

The theme interpreted throughout the centre is 'Country'. A range of static and interactive displays take you on a journey of places and people, past and present, through stories of geology, plants, animals and Aboriginal people and their culture. In order to achieve this flow of information, the design team spent a great deal of time becoming familiar with the park attractions and consulting extensively with key Aboriginal people. This would often mean travelling hundreds of kilometres on each trip, as Karijini people are now spread throughout the Pilbara. It was often difficult to gather

together a representative group of Aboriginal stakeholders, not only because of their scattered locations, but also because of the advanced age and health of several key elders. One of the most effective ways of explaining new ideas and concepts was to use a scale model of the visitor centre. The model made the trip from Melbourne to Karijini at least three times as part of this process, each time gathering a little more Pilbara red dirt for authenticity.

Inside the centre, a wall of running water enhances the gorge experience, made all the more real by the chirping of the desert tree frog, the trailing roots of a clinging fig tree and tiny bats nestled in crevices. Glass display cases protect Aboriginal artefacts, on temporary loan, that have been handed down by generations of Aboriginal people for whom Karijini was home.

Audio and video displays are used to capture the essence of Aboriginal songs and stories. These are at the core of Aboriginal culture and are used to teach young people about the land. They are a means of 'talking' with the country, looking after it and keeping it healthy.

Visitors to the park will also be able to view models of some of the park's more elusive wildlife. Hot summer temperatures send many animals into hiding, only emerging at sundown to search for food. In the centre, you can get up close and personal with a replica of a Pilbara olive python that has already sent a few hearts racing. You'll also discover the secret to the stone mounds, reminiscent of tiny volcanoes, often found along the slopes of the Hamersley Range.

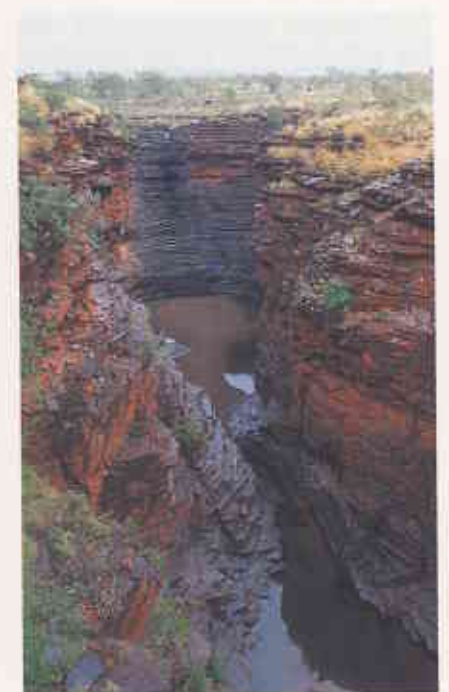
Pilbara summers no longer frighten visitors away, and those that choose to visit the park at this time of year can still come in and enjoy the displays. It may be warm, but 10 degrees cooler than outside will always be a welcome relief. A shaded outdoor seating area provides a great



Left: A diorama depicting the early pastoral days of the area.

Below left: The story of the formation of the park's unique geology.
Photos - John Gollings

Below: Joffre Falls.
Photo - Dennis Sarson/Lochman
Transparencies



opportunity to relax and absorb the Karijini landscape. From here, the only choices you need to make are what campground to use, which gorge to explore first, and when to climb Bunnurhuna (Mt Bruce). A bitumen road links the visitor centre with the Great Northern Highway to the west and the town of Tom Price to the east. The visitor centre is now accessible all year round, with the exception of the downpours associated with tropical cyclones, when even the highways can be closed.

THE FOYER

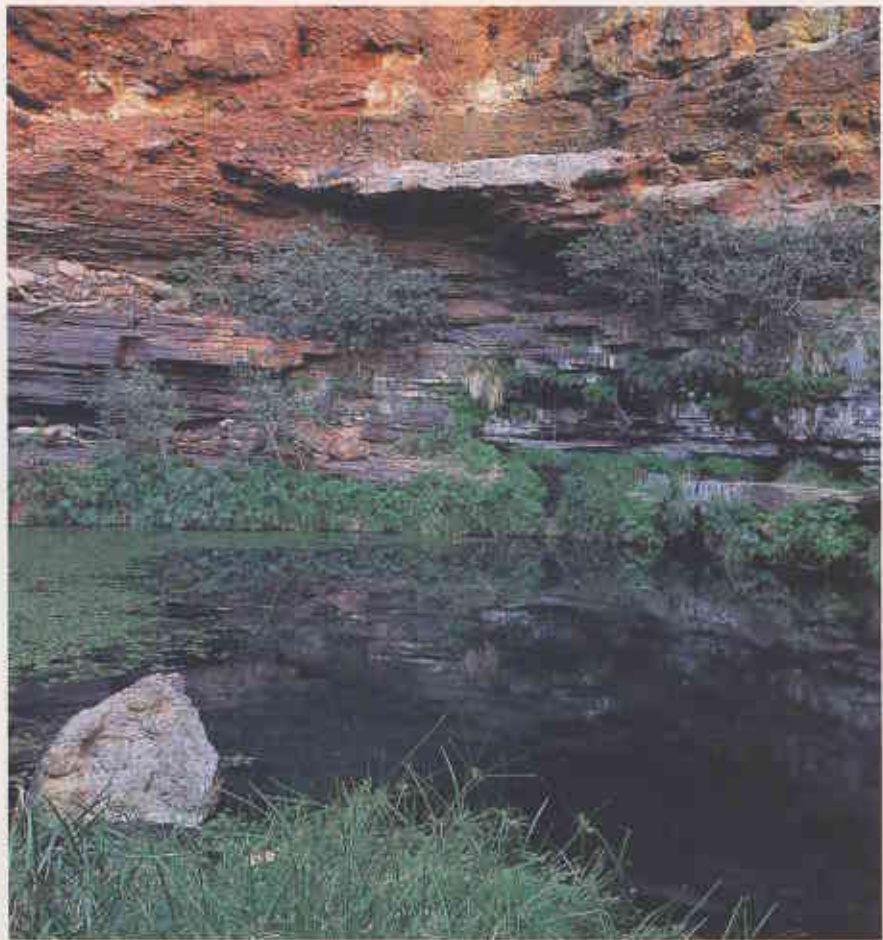
A park visitor centre is like the foyer of a theatre—it provides a sense of anticipation of what is to come.

The Karijini Visitor Centre was officially opened on 22 June 2001 by the Premier, Dr Geoff Gallop, and Banyjima Aboriginal elder Mr Wobby Parker. More than 350 guests attended the opening, travelling from around the Pilbara and from Perth. Maitland Parker, a local Banyjima man and Ranger-in-Charge of Karijini National Park, hosted the ceremony. It included a welcome to the country by Banyjima Aboriginal people, a display of traditional dancing and speeches from Aboriginal elders.

The centre has been the recipient of three Australian Institute of Architecture awards to date. It won the BHP Colorbond Steel Award for most innovative use of steel products in Western Australia and then won the national award for the same at a presentation night in Adelaide in early November 2001. It also received a commendation in the Sir Zelman Cowan Award for Public Buildings, the winner being the Victorian Museum.

While the visitor centre has been the focus of efforts for some time, behind the scenes, other park facilities have been added or improved. Shade sails are in place at popular picnic areas, while weathered steel lookouts complement the environment and provide safe opportunities to view the world-famous gorges. A new day-use facility has been established at Dales Gorge, 14 kilometres west of the visitor centre. It caters for both large coach groups and small family outings.

When reflecting on the establishment of the visitor centre,



determination is a word that springs to mind. The determination to not just meet visitor demands, but to challenge their expectations of what can be achieved in the State's second largest national park, remote from any major service centre; and the determination of a group of Aboriginal people wanting to keep their culture alive and share it with other Australians and visitors from around the world.

THE MAIN ATTRACTION

After passing through the visitor centre and experiencing views of Karijini, framed by the glass-walled galleries of the building, you are reminded that the park is the main attraction here. From the glass galleries you see views of the park out to the sides, both east and west. Mt Windell is viewed from the verandah at the front of the building, looking south through slots cut in the steel wall.

Karijini National Park is a place to explore and absorb; a place where thousands of visitors have the opportunity to sample the magnificent natural surrounds whether physically able or not, without destroying those surrounds or the experience of others.

Circular Pool, Dales Gorge.
Photo – Bill Bachman

It is a place that is not over-developed; where not all areas are made 'safe for all', a place where there is room to get away from people and enjoy the natural peace and quiet. There is room for people to challenge themselves, but the challenge is to conquer themselves, not to conquer or destroy the environment. It is a place where effort is rewarded with the experience, a place that is protected for our grandchildren's grandchildren to appreciate the same wonders of rocks and landscape, plants and animals, peace and solitude.

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Conserving the nature of WA



Thirteen years in the making, the Cape to Cape Track offers a unique view of WA's most popular national park. See page 28.



Karijini's new visitor centre provides a cultural and environmental focus point for visitors. See 'Karijini Calling' on page 10.



Dirk Hartog Island is our largest island. It has a fascinating history and a valuable biodiversity. Find out why on page 17.



'Landscape at the Heart' is an account of the first LANDSCOPE Expedition to the Carnarvon Range at the edge of the Little Sandy Desert. See page 40.



Does the delicate work of Western Australia's botanical artists have a place in the high-tech world of science? See page 23.

COVER

Aboriginal names have always been part of Australia's history, and many of the well known names for Australian animals are in common use today. 'Ancient animals, ancient names' (page 35) makes a case for adopting more Aboriginal names for our native mammals. The brush-tailed phascogale, for example, was known to Nyoongar people as the 'wambenga'.

Cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky

