





The guided experience

# A new journey

A quiet revolution is occurring. The days of driving into a national park to snap a few photos are disappearing. Increasingly, visitors are coming to expect a guided experience as the cost effective and time efficient way to enrich their overall experience of Western Australia's natural attractions. And local communities are reaping the benefits, as they begin to enjoy increased employment as tour guides.

by Gil Field



**N**ature-based tourism is a core attraction of the tourism industry in Western Australia. The Department of Conservation and Land Management licenses more than 400 tour operators to bring visitors to national parks and marine parks in Western Australia. Most of these operations include travel, accommodation and meals, with an added guided experience component. Most of the tour operators' clients are interstate and overseas visitors.

However, fewer than 20 per cent of our visitors are from interstate or overseas. In other words, more than 80 per cent are Western Australians who are exploring their vast State, and most of them are self-drive 'free and independent travellers'. So it would be fair to say that the future of tourism in Western Australia lies more in our domestic market. Purchasing guided experiences is where we, as travellers, can make a difference to our experience and help to employ people in the nature-based tourism industry.

### PARK EXPERIENCES

The department has 29 sites throughout Western Australia where guided activities are offered by staff and others. Access to these site-based activities is mostly by self-drive clients.

Daily attractions, such as the Monkey Mia Dolphin Experience and the Yanchep National Park Koala Experience, as well as more seasonal daily attractions, such as penguin



**Above:** A memorable moment at Monkey Mia, where the park guide improves the quality of experience for both people and dolphins.  
Photo – Gil Field

viewing at The Penguin Experience Island Discovery Centre (from November to April, outside the penguin breeding season), provide short but enriching encounters for visitors to those sites.

There is a range of regular and varied activities, such as the 'Go Bush!' program at The Hills Forest in Mundaring and the Cave Tour at Yanchep National Park, north of Perth.

Seasonal activities programs are also conducted. These include the 'dry season' guided activities at Mirima National Park in the east Kimberley, Geikie Gorge Boat Tour in the west Kimberley and the spring, summer and autumn activities at the Valley of the Giants in Walpole-Nornalup National Park.

*LANDSCOPE* Expeditions offer people the chance to join scientists and regional staff from the department, often in remote areas of the State, and participate in scientific research and monitoring of wildlife and ecological events. They have enjoyed a strong support base over the past 10 years.

Special events, such as The Big Bush Heritage Celebration on Easter Saturday at Wharnclyffe EcoDiscovery Centre in Margaret River, provide interpretive opportunities through guided activities at popular holiday times.

Customised activity programs and events for groups, such as the Australiana Day for Japanese visitors to The Hills Forest Discovery Centre, can also be provided.



**Previous page**  
**Main:** A Park EcoGuide reveals the story behind this whale bone on Contos Beach in Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park.  
Photo – Gil Field

**Insets (from left):** Spear throwing with local Nyoongar guides.

Photo – Tony Nathan  
**Trainee EcoGuides at Mundaring Sculpture Park in the Perth hills.**

Photo – Gil Field  
**Ready to go on a guided mountain biking adventure.**

**A close encounter of the furred kind.**  
Photos – Tony Nathan

**Left:** A Park EcoGuide helps youngsters get in touch with life on the edge at Contos Beach.  
Photo – David Gough



**Above and right:** Sharing Aboriginal culture is an interactive experience at Wharmcliffe EcoDiscovery Centre, in Margaret River.  
Photos – Tony Nathan

## TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Currently, tourism courses at university and TAFE colleges are rivalling the interest in environmental management courses, yet many environment graduates struggle to find employment. Something needs to be done to stimulate the local market for nature-based tourism products so that tourism graduates don't go the same way.

During the past 16 years, the Visitor Interpretation Section within the department has put considerable effort into the training and professional development of members of the nature-based tourism industry. A four-day Designing Interpretive Ecotour Activities workshop has been conducted some 20 times, and is now at least an annual event attended by students from the University of Notre Dame Australia, in Fremantle, staff from other conservation agencies and interested individuals. This workshop looks at the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of guided activity programs, nature-based tours and special events.

Two books produced by the department—*Best Recipes for Interpreting Our Heritage* and *Developing Ecotours and Other Interpretive Activity Programs*—are making a significant contribution to the quality of nature-based tourism in Western Australia and elsewhere, by providing a benchmark



for planning and designing activities, programs and tours in natural areas.

The department, in conjunction with the Western Australian Tourism Commission and the Kimberley Tourism Association, produced the highly successful *Kimberley Tourism Manual*. It was a response to requests from tour operators in the north-west seeking informed knowledge about the Kimberley environment and the places they were visiting. Now, the WA Government Old Growth Forest Policy and New Parks Strategy is funding a follow-up publication. The *South-West Tourism Manual* is currently in preparation and aims to benchmark the knowledge required for participants in the tourism industry in the south-west.

## NEW INITIATIVES

In 2001, the department initiated a pilot Park EcoGuide Program in Purnululu National Park in the Kimberley. The program used volunteer guides and park rangers. The aim was to see how many campers would purchase a guided activity experience in addition to paying park visitor and camping fees. Around a third of the park's visitors participated in a guided activity, and, while this provided enough funding to pay a wage, due to the park's remote location, it didn't cover the travel costs involved in running the program. Nevertheless, visitor response was most encouraging.

In the summer of 2001–2002, a trial EcoGuide Program was implemented in Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park at



Contos Campground, between Prevelly and Hamelin Bay, and at Wharnclyffe EcoDiscovery Centre (the old Wharnclyffe Mill) in Margaret River. Unfortunately, less than 10 per cent of campers at Contos attended the guided activities—an erratic and mostly disappointing response, but not wholly surprising since there were many more activities competing for visitors' time at this popular holiday destination.

In Easter 2002, The Big Bush Heritage Celebration at the Wharnclyffe EcoDiscovery Centre was launched as a special event, using contract ecoguides, park rangers and other staff. There were displays by community groups (State Emergency Service, Margaret River-Augusta Historical Association), government agencies (Agriculture WA, CoastCare) and local businesses (the Celtic band Beltane Fire, a wood sculptor, local photographer, and Aboriginal craft and performance groups). This was an alternative approach to that trialed a few months earlier. The intent was to attract local community involvement, as well as resident and visitor participation, in guided activities that celebrated our natural and cultural heritage values.

There were more than 300 participants, and this was seen as a good start to an annual event. It demonstrated the department's position in embracing the community in partnership with community groups, individuals, businesses, residents and visitors, and in generating local employment.

The Big Bush Heritage Celebration was part of the south-west Park Activities Programs held over Easter and the autumn school holidays. Guided activities were again offered in Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park at



**Top left:** The Penguin Experience Island Discovery Centre.  
Photo – Michael James

**Centre left:** Trainee EcoGuides consider bush survival as a problem-solving activity at The Hills Forest Discovery Centre near Mundaring.  
Photo – Gil Field

**Left:** Birdwatching—always one of the most popular of the guided wildlife observation activities on *LANDSCOPE* Expeditions.  
Photo – Kevin Coate

Contos, Hamelin Bay and Ellensbrook; in Pemberton at the Gloucester Tree and D'Entrecasteaux National Park; and at Walpole in the Walpole-Nornalup National Park and The Valley of the Giants. Existing and past programs were given new impetus with the employment of local guides to assist park rangers and others.

It is expected that maintaining these programs will build the park 'ecoguiding' business through word of mouth and return visits to the sites. The Valley of the Giants has developed and maintained an interpretive activities program over the past five years, promoting on-site guided activities as well as activities at other sites led by independent tour operators and guides in the Walpole area.

### CREATING A MARKET

The challenge ahead is to promote guided experiences to campers, other visitors and residents, and provide quality experiences. In this way, ecoguiding can become a profession, rather than just a casual seasonal employment opportunity.

Interpretation of the environment, history and culture through nature-based tourism enriches visitors' experiences, appreciation and support for management. Nature-based tourism also makes a financial contribution to local communities by stimulating the purchase of local products and providing local employment. Indirectly, through the use of environmental management programs and ecologically sustainable businesses, it minimises visitor impact by using water, energy and other resources wisely, and appropriately disposing of waste and rubbish where it cannot be reduced, reused or recycled.

The department's facilities and services are already making a significant contribution to local tourism businesses. The Tree Top Walk, in Walpole-Nornalup National Park's Valley of the Giants, has provided employment for locals as both ticketing staff and as guides. It is a major attraction to the area that has assisted other tourism businesses such as WOW Wilderness Adventures in Walpole, whose owner Gary Muir said, "Visitors to Walpole doubled and our family business trebled within one year of the Tree Top Walk opening".



The construction of the Monkey Mia Visitor Centre complex, with a new ticketing office for tour operators, has seen business for local boat tour operators double and the creation of a business in artworks sold on site.

In Perth, the successful 'Perth Outdoors' and 'Go Bush!' activities programs are expanding to cover regional parks and bushlands across the metropolitan area. The news sheet *Perth Outdoors Guided Activities, Tours and Attractions* is cooperatively marketing and promoting a variety of guided activities and tours at a range of venues around Perth. It is evident that there is plenty to see and do with a guide if people will just give it a go.

### THE FUTURE

Imagine arriving at your favourite campground and finding a range of low-cost activities available any day of the week—a Saturday evening meet and greet with a sausage sizzle, music and stories around the campfire and an open air slideshow highlighting local attractions; a Sunday morning beach walk where the kids could discover the intricacies of the fragile coastal environment in a fun and exciting way; and wildflower walks on weekdays with spotlighting tours at night. Such a

For the ultimate guided experience, work with children and animals.  
Photo - Tony Nathan

range of activities could easily be provided by local guides.

As we see the benefits of placing guides at key sites throughout Western Australia to appeal to the self-drive market, we can expect more guides at key attractions (such as parks, historic and cultural sites, wildlife events and visitor centres) and accommodation centres (resorts, camping areas). Subsequently, casual seasonal employment should grow to make way for permanent, professional and accredited guides.

Site-based guides can also provide tour operators with high-quality, cost-effective and time-efficient packaged components that can be added to their tours. What's needed now is a concerted effort by agencies, industry and media to raise the profile of guiding, so it becomes a viable and professional business in its own right.

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Winner of the Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting

# LANDSCOPE



VOLUME SEVENTEEN, NUMBER 4, WINTER 2002



*Native animals need tree hollows and people need wood. How are these conflicting uses managed? See page 20.*

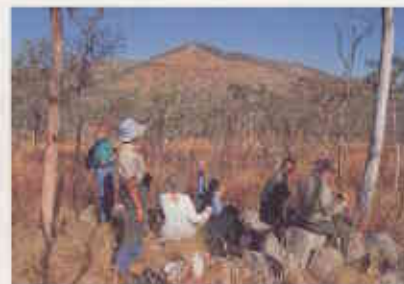
*An exciting range of recreational opportunities are being offered in some national parks, creating employment for locals. See page 28.*



*Declining water levels threaten a remarkable community of cave-dwellers in Yanchep National Park. Turn to page 34.*



*The search to find out the cause of a new tree killer known as Mundulla Yellows. See page 41.*



*Re-discovering the long-forgotten memoirs of a Kimberley pioneer. See page 48.*

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**Scientific/technical advice:** Andrew Burbidge, Keith Morris, Kevin Kenneally, Paul Jones and staff of Science Division.

**Design and production:** Tiffany Aberin, Maria Duthie, Gooitzen van der Meer.

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Colour separation by Colourbox Digital.

Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print.

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Published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

## COVER

*Leafy seadragons are occasionally seen in the seagrass around the Busselton Jetty (see page 10). They are in the same family as seahorses but, unlike seahorses, they have leafy appendages that make them almost invisible in their surroundings. The male carries the eggs in the skin beneath his tail. After hatching, the young swim off to fend for themselves.*

*Cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinksy*



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