





Stay ... just a little bit longer

The Karri Forest Explorer self-drive tour winds through a patchwork of towns, forests, farmland and vineyards in and around Pemberton. Visitors explore the area and, with innovative interpretation including sculpture and radio, explore the stories and fables of the people whose lives have been touched by the forest.

by Cliff Winfield



The steam whistle blows. Its quaint sound, from another era, echoes off the trunks of the tall karri trees on the north side of the valley. Then, along with the dawn sun, it pervades the workers' cottages nestled in the cleft on the south side. It's 6.00 am and the whistle is calling workers for the first shift at Pemberton Mill, as it has done for around 80 years.

Pemberton Mill is the largest karri sawmill and was once the main source of jobs for the area. It provided employment for those who lived in the rows of weatherboard cottages in Pemberton. It also provided extra work to help supplement farmers struggling to establish orchards, dairy and beef herds or potato crops on small farms hacked out of the towering karri forests surrounding the township.

Small town, big changes

Pemberton is a sophisticated village these days, but remnants of a mill-town psyche still linger in the town. Established in the 1930s, when almost everyone worked in the one industry and most things you needed to live were available in the town, the social fabric still echoes the days when the farmers joined the timber workers on Saturday nights for the dance at the mill hall and stayed for the footy on Sunday. A healthy parochialism lingers in the Pemberton community and, with the steady growth in tourism, horticulture and viticulture, it has been weaning itself from dependence on the timber industry for the past 20 years or so.

Nevertheless, when the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) and

Protecting Our Old Growth Forest policy proposed drastic reductions in the level of karri forest available to the timber industry, the Pemberton community bore the economic brunt. Five years ago, the Pemberton Mill cut about 120,000 tonnes of karri, most of it large logs from old growth forests. When the new Forest Management Plan is implemented, the mill will process only about 60,000 tonnes of karri, mostly smaller logs from regrowth forest.

Road to success

By way of compensation, a number of economic, employment and community benefits were proposed. One of the initiatives was the allocation of \$1 million in capital funding to the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) to create a new tourist drive through the forest. When the CALM planning team met to discuss how to achieve this, it was quickly identified that it would be better to try to upgrade and use existing roads and popular places in the forest around Pemberton, rather than attempt to create a set of new ones. But could renovating forest visitor facilities really create tangible and sustainable community benefits?

In the short term, employment, tenders and supply contracts would obviously benefit the local communities during the construction phase. Recent research on the economic benefits of tourism in the southern forest by the Cooperative



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Main The north-eastern part of the drive winds through the Giblett Forest, an important site for the area's recent history.

Inset The bark of a karri tree.

Photos - Cliff Winfield

Above left The Pemberton Mill sits in front of the town and was once the main source of jobs for the area.

Photo - Jiri Lochman

Left The mill hall was once one of Pemberton's prominent social features.

Photo - Cliff Winfield

Below right Boardwalks like this one at Warren River Cedar lead visitors to information and interpretation sites along the way.

Photo – Cliff Winfield

Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism indicates that visitors to the southern forests spend around \$75 per person per day.

Increasing visitor numbers to an area is a difficult task and, in many cases, has more to do with marketing than the provision of facilities. On the other hand, creating reasons for visitors to stay longer is relatively easy, and has the same net result in terms of 'visitor nights'. If the creation of a tourist drive could entice visitors to the region to stay a few days longer, or to return to see more, the flow-on to the tourist-based businesses and, hence, the wider community would be substantial and continuing.

The notion that the investment of a relatively small amount of public money into visitor facilities could bring substantial, tangible and sustainable benefits to a community had been well-illustrated 100 kilometres away in Walpole. The construction of the Tree Top Walk at the Valley of the Giants in 1996 did not dramatically change visitor numbers to the area, but it changed the visitation pattern (see 'Saving the Giants', *LANDSCOPE*, Spring 1996). People stayed in the area longer, and other tourism products emerged to create an even greater choice of things to do. Supply businesses—grocery stores and fuel stations—increased their turnover, and a bakery, pharmacy, souvenir shop and accommodation developments followed. All these businesses, and more, were already operating in Pemberton, but the community faced the uncertainty of whether or not they would remain viable, considering the imminent downturn in the timber industry.

The key to creating a new tourism product seemed to lie in linking the renovated sites into a package, so instead of just visiting one site, visitors would be 'hooked' and want to take in a whole range of experiences and stories.

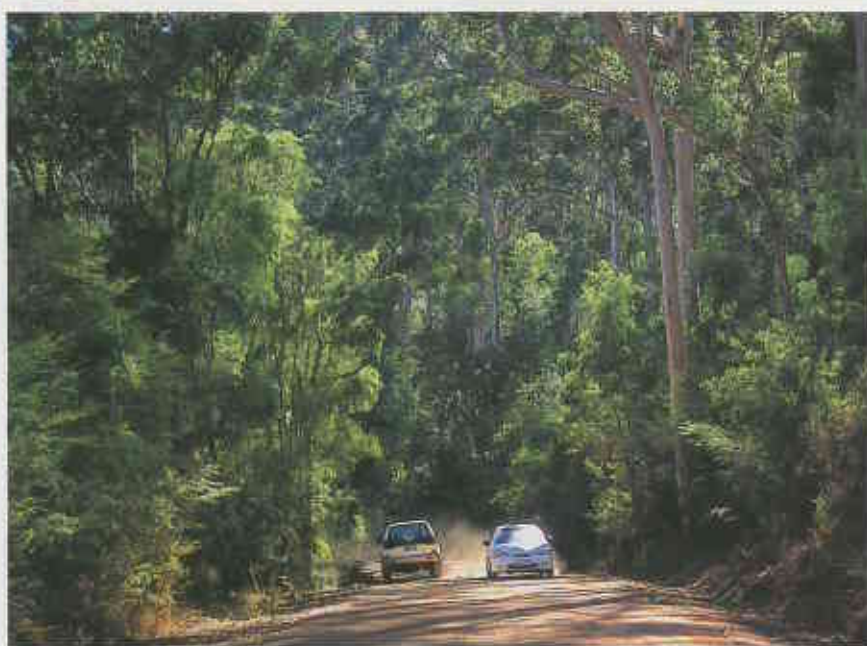


Planning the journey

There was already a drive-tour not so far away. The Great Forest Trees Drive, in Shannon National Park, traverses forest for its entire length. However, the drive around Pemberton would be different. Rather than just focusing on the forest, it would weave through a patchwork of towns, forests, farmland and vineyards.

Planning began when a line was drawn on a map that linked those recreation sites in national parks and

State forest in need of renovation that were also within driving distance of Pemberton. Work had already begun on providing new facilities at Beedelup Falls, Gloucester Tree and Big Brook Dam, and sites along Heartbreak Trail in Warren National Park were suffering environmental damage and needed to be redesigned. These sites were obvious choices to include on the drive. The planning team looked at the feasibility of joining these into a loop road suitable for conventional vehicles and



small coaches. In addition to the existing experience, there was a commitment to create some new experiences in Giblett Block, the focus of anti-logging protests prior to the halt of cutting in old growth forests, and the proposal for the area to become a national park.

Working with communities

There were many people with a close interest in the proposed drive tour. Tour operators, accommodation proprietors, and café and winery operators put in submissions or attended public meetings to discuss the draft master plan for the proposed drive and, because the route was taking in Giblett Forest, there was close scrutiny and contribution by the green movement. In some cases, people who a year or so before had been in opposite camps during anti-logging

Above Vineyards are now a feature of the Pemberton landscape.

Above left The views along the drive are spectacular, like this one from the Warren River lookout.

Centre left The Karri Forest Explorer drive takes visitors through areas of dense forest.

Left A 'Big Karri' in the Big Brook Forest gives visitors a sense of the enormity of its giant residents.

Photos – Cliff Winfield



Above Spring wildflowers blanket the floor of the karri forest.

Photo – Cliff Winfield

Right Innovative techniques were used to bring the interpretive panels to life. Image by Graphic Source

protests, found themselves working together to fathom best outcomes for management, conservation and tourism. At ground level, CALM recreation officers and representatives of green groups had site meetings to discuss options for making roads safer and creating new environmental experiences, while protecting environmental values.

Journey through time and space

The Karri Forest Explorer journey begins when you hop into your car in Pemberton and head along Vasse Highway, turn left at the railway crossing and begin a voyage that is both real and imaginary. Almost immediately, you feel the presence of the karri forest, or at least a sense of its enormity and the challenges it presented to settlers trying to hack a hole in it to establish pasture. You wonder how they did it. There are so many stories to be heard about the people whose lives were touched or altered by the forest.

These sentiments make the experience much more than just a scenic drive. It is an interpretive

Dear Mother
 This is the strangest I received. I am amazed by how well it turned out. You will forgive me for taking a little longer. It is happening now and more things will then will come to assist others in my family.
 You will see me from the newspaper but with the yellow hair gone, and I'll be all way of course, and you know I'm really a little nervous. She is smiling now. There are for the 100 you see for me. It is beautiful and the morning at 10 hours. I'm sorry about others to make them fit. I got the 100 you in 2000, but you were 100 too much. I have pulled your eye off, I'm sorry and am leaving a new brand one for 1000 with the mail.
 Well, I was 100 off. It is time for an afternoon writing about. I have been too long. I'm not too in the house.
 Your ever loving daughter
 Hilda
 Pemberton, Western Australia, May 1911

Karri Forest Explorer

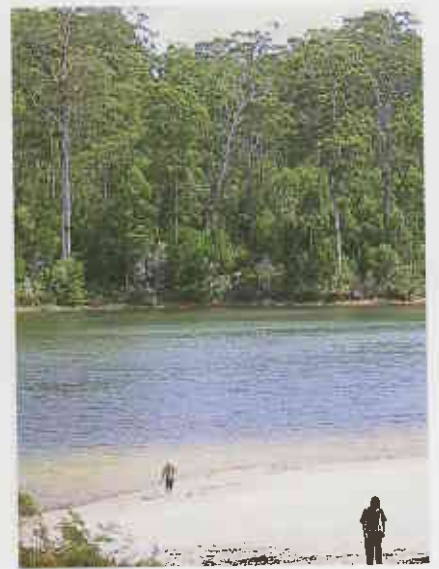
DEPARTMENT OF
Conservation
 AND LAND MANAGEMENT

journey through people's lives—Aboriginal people, settlers and their families, foresters and timber workers, environmentalists and religious cults. The natural values are revealed through recreations of history seen through the eyes of these people as they responded to the effects of the forest.

And now for something completely different . . .

Creating the interpretation and visitor information presented an opportunity to do something different. Writer Jill Griffith was given plenty of background information, but was also given a clean slate for the style of the on-site interpretation. She spent time

driving the proposed route through the forest and talking to locals, and then experimented with various written models. Finally, she settled on the approach of creating a number of fictitious characters, who expressed how they felt about the landscape, events and experiences through a series of letters, diaries and notebooks. In this genre, for example, the fictitious character of Hilda, a settler's wife, comes to life when we read a sequence of private letters, written to her mother over a period of years, describing the joys and despairs of farm life in Pemberton during the 1920s. Similarly, fictional journals by foresters, and notebooks of national park rangers



Above left Visitors can walk along a bridge suspended under Beedelup Falls in Beedelup National Park.

Above Big Brook Dam is a popular spot along the Karri Forest Explorer drive.

Left Sculptures, like this one of the bullocks and whim, illustrate the stories of the area's history.

Photos – Cliff Winfield



tell both historical and contemporary accounts of life in the karri forest. At one stop, a Nyoongar Dreaming story explains the creation of the big trees.

Places on the drive were chosen specifically because they gave particular meaning to a story. For example, Big Brook Forest was the first karri forest to be regrown for timber after cutting in the 1920s and 1930s (prior to this, land had been released for farming once commercial timber had been removed). The interpretation there tells the story of the cessation of karri forest being cleared for farmland, and the surrounding forest demonstrates karri can regrow into an impressive forest once again. The protest site in Giblett

Forest was an obvious place to tell of the relatively recent struggle to halt logging in old growth forest and have more forest set aside as national parks.

Innovation and technology

At Big Brook Dam a steel sculpture of a bullock team and whim introduce the visual interpretation. Other written and visual interpretation along the Karri Forest Explorer drive is presented on state-of-the-art panels. The preparation of the panels employed 3D scanning techniques, so objects, such as the foresters' measuring instruments, books, diaries, feathers, pressed flowers and other mementos, appear to be sitting on the panels, rather than just

part of the artwork. A number of historic images from the Batty Library bring the past days poignantly to life. The finished art is printed onto special weatherproof film and mounted on metal panels placed at chosen settings in the bush. The visual and written interpretations are complemented by a series of short presentations transmitted from six narrowcasting, solar-powered FM radio stations, placed at strategic stopping points along the drive. Transcripts and oral histories from people whose lives were touched by the forest, fictional recreations of other events such as fires or the anti-logging protest, and topical information on seasonal wildflowers and geological features run on continuous programs received through a car radio tuned to 100MHz FM.

At a leisurely pace, taking in the interpretation and stopping at one of the cafés or wineries along the way, exploring the 80-kilometre drive can occupy a full day. However, the route is designed so that those who prefer to break their drive into smaller sessions,

Right A new viewing platform, Beedelup Lookout, offers visitors views into the beautiful national park.

Below right Phil Goldring, of Hidden River, says the drive has significantly increased traffic and passing trade outside his vineyard and cafe.

Bottom Many visitors take advantage of the opportunity to stop and explore areas of interest on foot.

Photos – Cliff Winfield

or only do an abbreviated version, can do so without losing the thread of the interpretation.

The Protecting Our Old Growth Forests policy allocated funding for capital works in proposed new national parks. Given the pristine nature of some of the areas set aside for the new parks, it was more appropriate in some cases to invest in upgrading existing facilities nearby, rather than to create new ones. For example, proposed Hawke National Park is just over the river from existing facilities at Warren National Park. So some new parks funding was allocated to finishing the Karri Forest Explorer drive in Warren National Park. Taking into account the works in progress at Beedelup Falls and the above capital funds, around \$3 million has been invested in the project.

So, has it worked?

It's hard to gauge the success of the drive, but as Andy Russell, a hiking tour operator and member of the Warren Environment Group, says:

"I see people out there in Giblett Forest often, and we didn't see that before. The presentation of the drive gives them the confidence to be a bit more adventurous, to go exploring for themselves I suppose."

Phil Goldring owns Hidden River vineyard and café, which is on the route. He says the road outside his business is the busiest gravel road in the Shire. The Karri Forest Explorer drive seems to be used by locals too:

"We often have locals taking visiting friends and relatives around the drive. It seems to give a focus to the forest stories," he said.



Sue Mountford of Mountford Wines says much of their cellar door traffic now comes via the Karri Forest Explorer.

Vehicle counts are another way to test whether or not people are using the drive. During October, in a remote location in Giblett Forest where we would not expect vehicles other than those doing the drive, a traffic counter recorded more than 185 passes. Using data gathered from a variety of locations throughout the south-west forests, we can extrapolate that the annual visitation is probably around 2,500 vehicles. If we accept the premise that experiencing the drive would add an extra day to the visitor's stay in Pemberton, using other visitor data and the recent research work, it seems fair to conclude that more than 6,000 visitors stayed an extra night in the area, at an average spend of \$75 per person per day. It is fair, then, to conclude that an extra \$450,000 per annum is circulating in local Pemberton businesses.

So, what was set up to compensate for the downsizing of an industry, that provided an important social and economic framework for Pemberton and surrounding areas, has now become an important tourist attraction that protects and showcases the area's natural values and history, and in turn assists in providing economic stability.



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