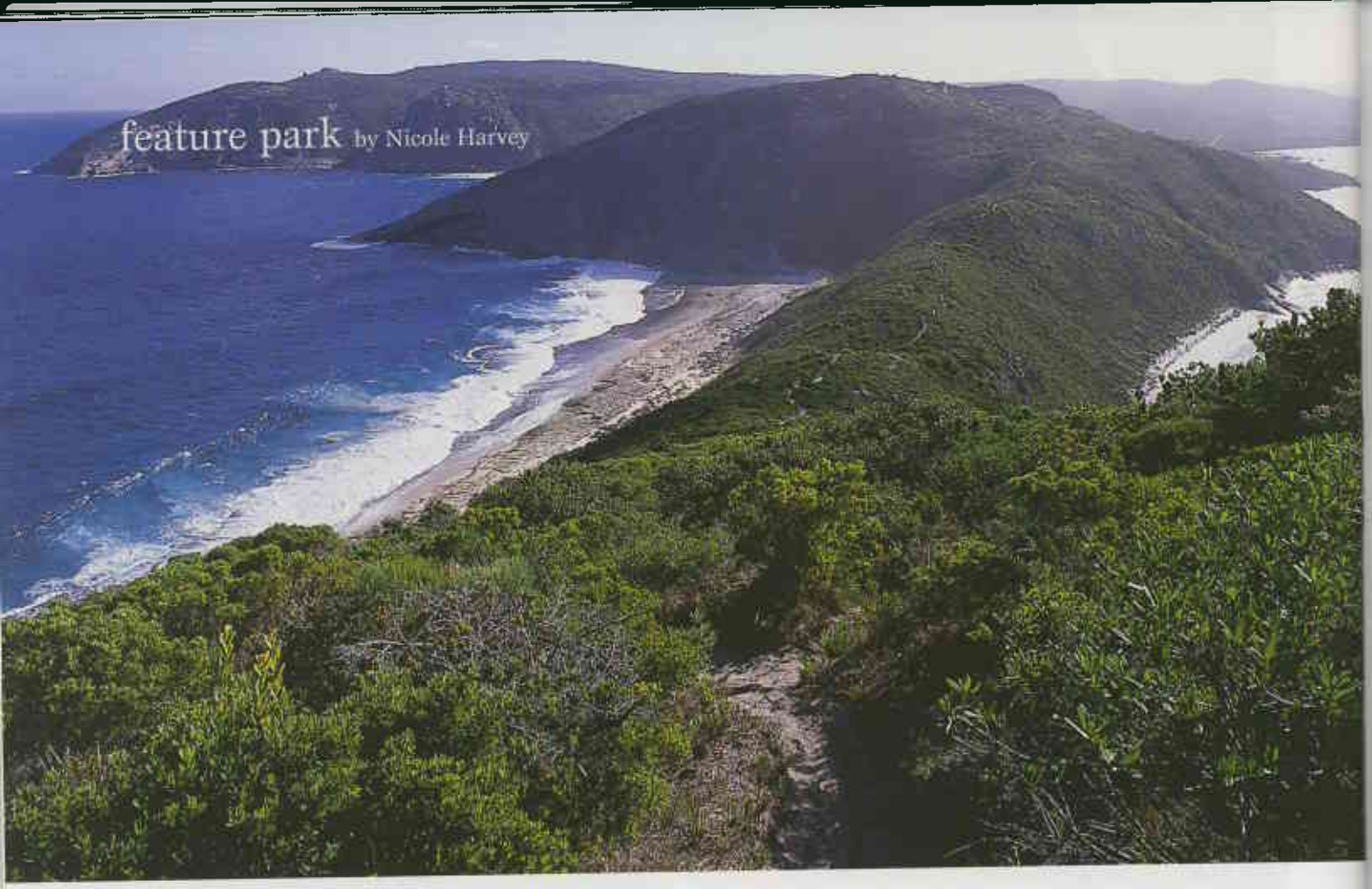

feature park by Nicole Harvey

Torndirrup National Park

Ancient rocks moulded into fascinating formations by the pounding waves of the Southern Ocean are just some of the attractions of this starkly beautiful part of Western Australia.

Above View from the Bald Head footpath, Flinders Peninsula.
Photo – Alex Bond

Facing page
Top A graphic reminder of the need for extreme care on this coastline.
Photo – Martin Lloyd/CALM

Far right Stony Hill.
Photo – Steve Sadler

Cliffs, staggering rock formations and the surging Southern Ocean typify the coastline just south of Albany. The aesthetic and environmental importance of the region was recognised early in Western Australia's history and, in 1918, it became one of the first areas in the State to be designated as a national park.

Torndirrup National Park continues to captivate; attracting around a quarter of a million visitors each year, it is now one of the busiest protected areas in WA.

The Torndirrup coast is a reminder that the environment is constantly changing. Odd, angular rocks have clearly been weathered by water, wind and time. Hills are clothed with plants that avoid growing too high. As escarpments crumble and waves crash around inlets, the elements themselves seem part of the battle for survival.

The first stop for most visitors is 'The Gap'. This daunting sight is, unsurprisingly, a gash in the peninsula. Its 50-metre rock walls look like neat stacks of giant building blocks. A small lookout is perched near the edge of the drop, providing a spectacular and safe view of waves pounding into the chasm below. At The Gap, there are clues to the extensive land movements that took place during Australia's geological history.

The three main rock types of the Torndirrup peninsula can be seen. Each of these formed at different stages in Australia's geological history. There are striped rocks, gneisses, which formed at great depths in the Earth some 1,300 to 1,600 million years ago, long before vertebrate life existed. The crystalline boulders common in the area are granite and were created when Australia and Antarctica collided around 1,160 million years ago. Cliffs of creamy white rock are also visible from The Gap. This is limestone formed during an ice age a mere 120,000 years ago. At this time, such large amounts of water were frozen at the Earth's poles that an enormous sandplain developed south of the present-day Australia. Wind drove sand and shells from this expanse into great dunes that transformed into the limestone of the region.

The Natural Bridge is only a brief

walk from The Gap. Its name aptly describes this unusual landform. The arching piece of short and stubby rock has remained where those around it have been washed away. Visitors are advised to resist the temptation to cross this footbridge because the Southern Ocean and gusty sea breezes can be unpredictable and dangerous.

A few kilometres east of The Gap, a walk leads to the Blowholes, where the sea forces air and water through cracks in the granite. The resulting explosions of noise and water keep the visitor—watching at a safe distance—on edge.

The Torndirrup coastline can be dangerous. Many people have slipped from the rocks or have been washed into the ocean. Visitors should always be on the lookout and remain well above sea level, as a freak wave or large swell can rise in a previously calm ocean. The continental shelf is unusually close to the coastline here, which is why the power of oceanic waves can reach the mainland.

There are other short and medium intensity walks to major park lookouts, and also some tougher hikes. Visitors can experience swamps; low heath, scrub and banksia woodlands; and small outliers of tall karri and jarrah-marri forest. The diversity in habitats means that the park supports a variety of wildflowers and wildlife. The Albany woollybush, for example, grows to three metres high and has distinctive soft, greyish-green foliage with small red flowers in the warmer months. In spring, it is the sheer abundance of the wildflowers that steals the visitor's attention.

Walkers will often see western grey kangaroos. Bird life is abundant, with various seabirds such as terns and albatrosses, brush bronzewing pigeons, New Holland honeyeaters and western rosellas common on the trails. Secretive, nocturnal animals in the park include pygmy possums, honey possums and quendas (short-nosed bandicoots). The endangered dibbler was last recorded here in the early 1980s.

July to October is whale-watching time in Albany. The Torndirrup coast is an excellent vantage point from which to see distant humpback and southern right whales. New Zealand fur seals and Australian sea lions also visit this region, but common dolphins are probably the most locally abundant of the marine mammals. But even without glimpsing marine mammals, the strength and beauty of this coast makes visiting Torndirrup National Park a humbling and inspiring experience.

park facts

Where is it? 10 kilometres south of Albany. Frenchman Bay Road leads around Princess Royal Harbour to the park. Roads are well signposted and sealed to all the major park destinations. Donations are welcomed at some sites, with the funds being used to help improve and maintain visitor facilities.

Total area 3,936 hectares.

What to do Walking, watching the Southern Ocean meet the rocky peninsula, whale watching in late winter and early spring, photography, enjoying the wildflowers in spring and early summer.

Walks There are many easy, five to 20-minute walks within the park that include the pathway to The Gap and the Natural Bridge. Check at the local office for more details.

Must see sites Natural Bridge, The Gap.

Naming The park was named after the Aboriginal families that lived on the peninsula and to the west of what is now Albany.

Nearest CALM Office 120 Albany Highway, Albany. Telephone (08) 9842 4500.

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Regulars

Erratum

The photograph in the Autumn 2004 issue of *LANDSCOPE* (mid left, page 52) is the rare *Diuris purdiei* not *Diuris corymbosa* as stated in the caption.

The photograph in the Summer 2003-04 issue of a snail on p. 56 and p. 61 was incorrectly captioned. The photo is of the introduced predatory snail *Oxychilus* sp., which is thought to be at least partly responsible for the extinction of the Pemberton and Albany snails, and is a threat to many of our native terrestrial snails.

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