



Since 1971, when a rough four-wheel-drive track was pushed through rugged dunes and scrub to the westernmost point on the Australian mainland, many thousands of fishing enthusiasts have become regular visitors to Steep Point, at Shark Bay. There most of them stay, to camp and fish at the best land-based fishing spot in Australia. But south of Steep Point are landscapes with awesome scenery, from high shifting dunefields to rugged ocean-torn cliffs. The area is in the proposed Edel Land national park.

An aerial photograph of a rugged coastline. In the foreground, a dark, sheer cliff face meets the ocean, with white waves crashing against its base. The middle ground shows a wide, sandy beach and a vast expanse of green and brown vegetation. In the background, the ocean extends to the horizon under a clear sky. The image is framed by a light-colored border with a faint grid pattern.

Steeped in beauty

*by Carolyn Thomson-Dans, Dave Rose,
Paul Dickenson and Cathy Zwick*



When Dutch mariner Willem de Vlamingh sailed past the coast of Edel Land, south of Shark Bay, on 29 January 1697 he commented that:

“The land here appears very bleak, and so abrupt as if the coast had been chopped off with an axe, which makes it impossible to land. The waves break here with so great a fury that one should say that everything around must shake and become dismembered, which appears to us a truly terrible sight. Nevertheless, we found it rather difficult to drag ourselves away from this evil place.”

When de Vlamingh’s quote is read to him, Paul Dickenson laughs. “Yes, they found it **difficult to drag** themselves away from this evil place.” For the last 10 years Paul has managed the camping and recreation areas at Steep Point and its surroundings for Shark Bay Salt, the leaseholders of Carrarang Station, the northern part of which is the proposed Edel Land national park. Paul can attest to the area’s popularity, which, despite its remoteness, draws about 5500 visitors a year. Camping at Steep Point is carefully managed through a booking system (www.steepoint.com.au) to ensure that the fragile nature of the coast can sustain visitation at peak times. With the recent sale of both the salt operation and station, management of the northern part of Carrarang Station will soon be transferred to the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), to allow the establishment of the proposed Edel Land national park.

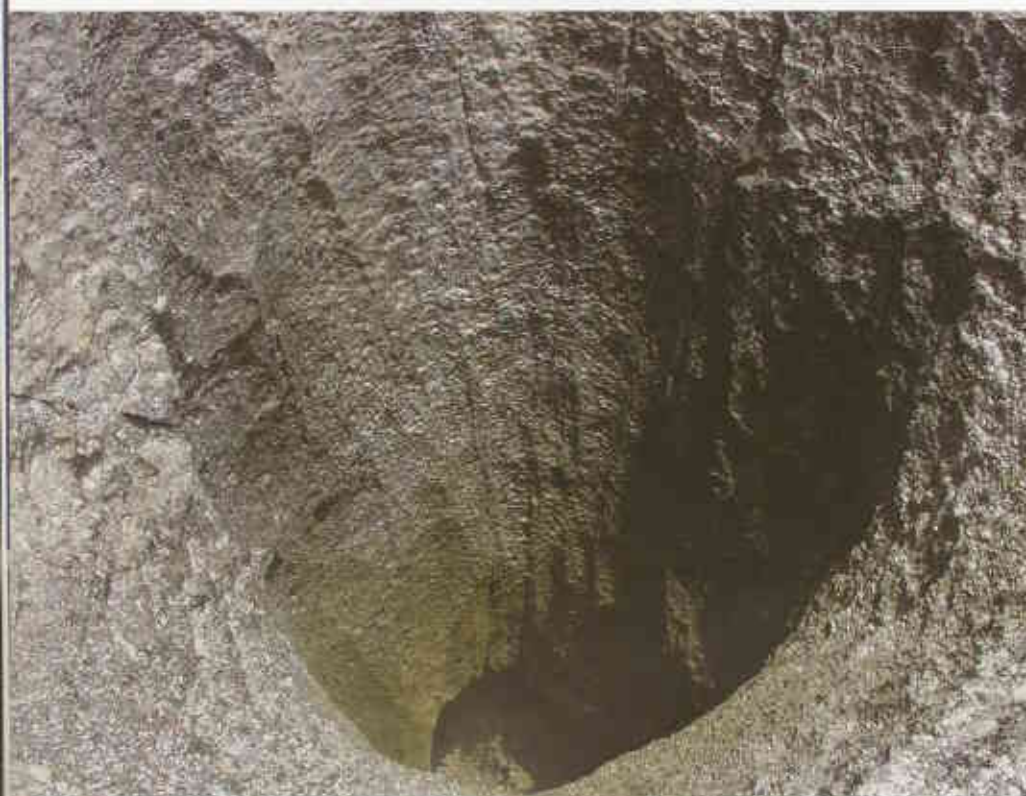
Early history

When Europeans arrived in the Shark Bay area, the largest Aboriginal camp they noted was in the proposed park at False Entrance, where fresh

water was available. Another site in the proposed park—the Blowholes at Thunder Bay—was an important spiritual site for the local Malgana people. However, little is known about Aboriginal use of this part of Shark Bay, due to the lack of archaeological surveys.

Edel Land is one of the oldest place names in Australia still in use today. Dutch explorer Frederick de Houtman sailed north along the WA coast in 1618 and named ‘d’Edels’ Land’ after Jacob d’Edel, a Member of the Council of the Indies and Supercargo (officer in charge of the cargo) on the *Amsterdam* that was accompanying Houtman’s vessel, *Durdrecht*. The name, marked on a sea chart from 1619 by Joannes Van Keulen, originally referred to the mainland adjacent to the Houtman Abrolhos Islands. Today, however, the name is generally used to refer to the mainland between Geraldton and Shark Bay. However, the proposed Edel Land national park will only cover the northern part of the Edel Land peninsula at Shark Bay.

In 1699, English explorer William Dampier sailed into Shark Bay and named the region ‘Sharks Bay’ due to the large numbers of sharks he saw. The Frenchmen de Freycinet, Hamelin and Baudin passed through the area over the period from 1801 to 1818, naming many geographical features, including Bellefin Prong (named by Louis de Freycinet in 1801 after the surgeon



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Main Zuytdorp Cliffs near Steep Point.

Photo – Bill Bachman

Insets top and base Detail of

Volkersen’s map of the ‘Lant van Eendracht’ (Shark Bay) 1658 made by Dutch sea captain Samuel Volkersen. *Image courtesy Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague.*

Bottom left Remains of a starfish and sand dollar.

Above left Paul Dickenson has managed camping and recreation areas at Steep Point for the last 10 years.

Left Large blowhole at Thunder Bay. *Photos – Carolyn Thomson-Dans/CALM*

Below right The site of an old pearling camp on the west coast of Heirisson Prong.
 Photo – Jiri Lochman

aboard the *Naturaliste*) and Heirisson Prong (after de Freycinet's sub-lieutenant). The aridity of the landscape and the lack of obvious water sources did little to create any real French enthusiasm for the region.

The next seafarer of note to arrive was Captain Henry Mangles Denham, aboard the HMS *Herald*, in 1858. While sailing along the coast of Edel Land, he named Epineux Bay (today known as Crayfish Bay). Around this time, American, English and French whalers plied the coastal waters. In the 1870s, Charles Broadhurst imported dozens of Asian men to collect the lucrative pearlshells at Shark Bay, together with enforced Aboriginal labour. Wilya Mia (which means 'shell camp'), on Heirisson Prong, was once part of the busiest pearling areas in Shark Bay, with hundreds of people working there.

“A wonder to see”

Today, Edel Land still offers a remote, nature-based experience that is all the more rewarding because the area is difficult to get to.

Shelter Bay, which fringes the Shark Bay Marine Park, is an idyllic spot that provides respite from the relentless strong summer winds. Across South Passage, there are views to Dirk Hartog Island, another proposed national park that is also steeped in history, being the first place in Western Australia that Europeans were known to come ashore. Parts of Shelter Bay are closed to driving every year between November and May, when loggerhead turtles nest and hatch on the beach around the full moon, and visitors are given guidelines to minimise their impact on turtles. Shorebirds that use the beach include Pacific gulls and oystercatchers. Hermit crabs are numerous along the water's edge.

Steep Point (translated into English from Steyl Hoeck, the name given to it by de Vlamingh) has become a





Above Looking north along the Zuytdorp Cliffs.

Photo – Cathy Zwick/CALM



Left A migrating humpback whale alongside Steep Point.

Photo – Stax Stevens



Below left Fishing at Steep Point.

Photo – Layton Cooper

drawcard for those who want to stand at the westernmost point of mainland Australia, a great place to watch the sun set through a window in the rock and contemplate the crashing surf that will sometimes wash over the high cliffs. A rock cairn was built here by the Leyland brothers in 1966 after an arduous overland trek through the then-roadless area to reach it.

People fish from the cliff top for Spanish mackerel, tuna, tailor, sea kingfish, sailfish, big sharks and other species. The most popular form of fishing here is ballooning, where big baits are carried several hundred metres offshore by gas-filled balloons. At least 320 species of fish, including occasional whale sharks and huge tiger sharks, have been recorded in South Passage. Other large marine animals include humpback whales, killer whales and dugong. There has even been an elephant seal—normally only seen in the sub-Antarctic—born on a beach

near Steep Point in 1996, one of only two such births ever recorded in Western Australia.

Steep Point is at the northern end of the Zuytdorp Cliffs, which provide breathtaking views from high vantage points, while surf crashes far below with such force that spray constantly showers over the cliff tops, a scene described in the log of de Vlamingh's vessel, the *Geelewinck*, as:

"High steep land and very precipitous... altogether high and bare, without any green thing on it and very steep at the top... without any beach at its foot, with heavy surf that is a wonder to see."

Euros can be seen in and around rocks along the top of the sea cliffs—a seemingly incongruous sight silhouetted against the ocean on these high vantage points—while green turtles, sharks and other kinds of marine animals may sometimes be spotted in the water below.

Differing features along the length of the cliffs are accessed via a rough sandy track that is constantly being gouged out by the wind. At Thunder Bay—so named because immense waves thunder into this rocky bay in rough weather—surf is forced through fissures in the cliffs to produce the eerie sound of the Blowholes, sometimes shooting spray up to 10 metres in the air. On a clear day, Dicko's Lookout provides sweeping views over Shark Bay's birrida system if you look inland. Crayfish Bay testifies to the bountiful marine life that lives offshore, with colourful shells of all shapes and sizes crowding the sandy beach and excellent fishing.

Seafarers and smugglers

The next bay to the south is known as False Entrance because mariners have sometimes confused it with South Passage (the 'true' entrance to Shark Bay). To reach False Entrance from

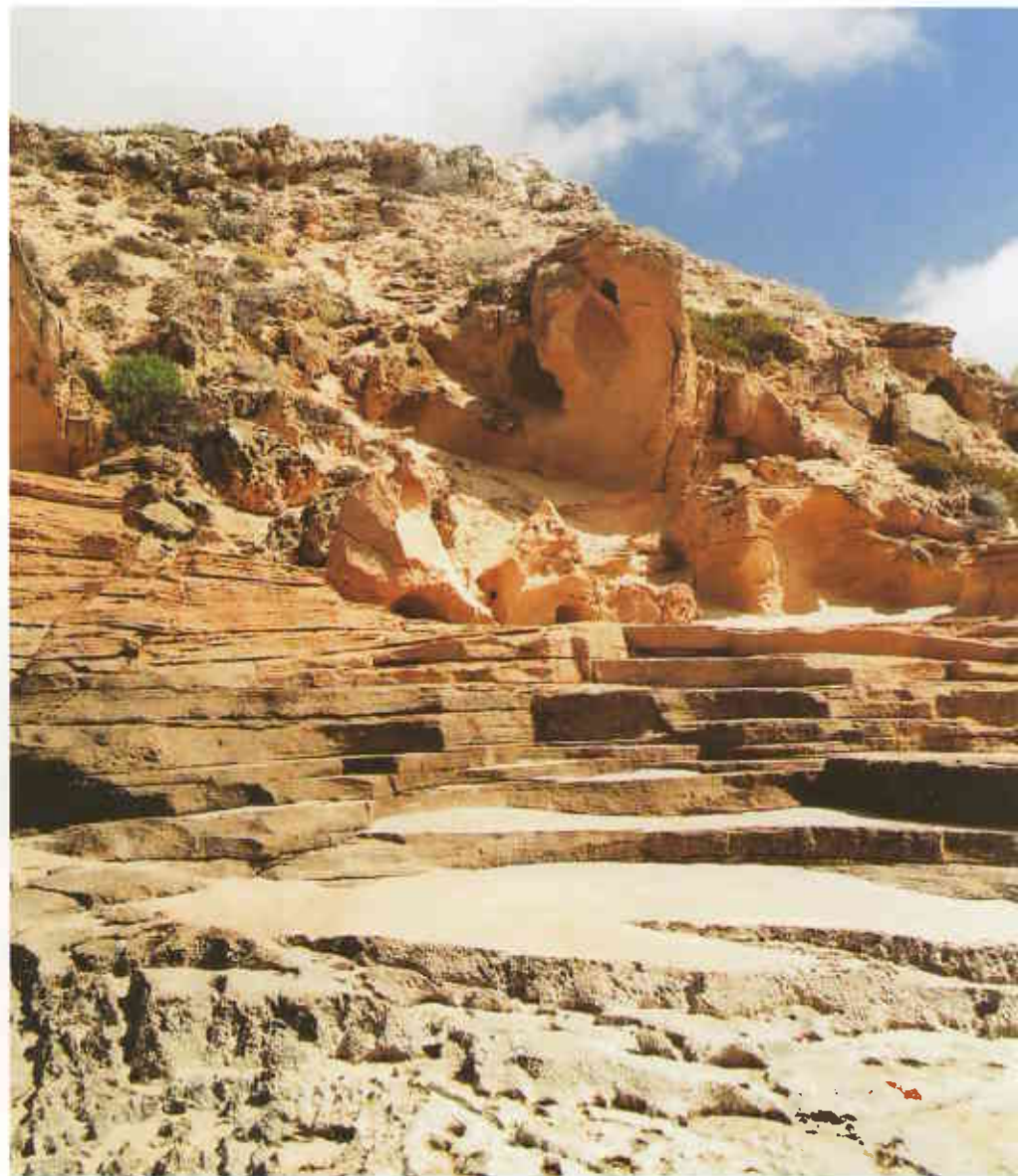
Crayfish Bay you must traverse large undulating white dunefields that are constantly being moved and reshaped by the winds, smothering vegetation in their path. These extensive bare, moving sand dunes are starkly beautiful, especially on a windy day when the wind constantly whips the sand over the leading edges of the dunes.

In April 1963 the prawn trawler *Nor 6* sank near False Entrance on her maiden voyage. The skipper, Jack Drinan, managed to survive by clinging to the vessel's ice box but strong easterly winds took him out to sea for 16 days, before he was eventually blown back towards shore and rescued. The bodies of the three other crew members were never found.

In 2002, smugglers attempted to use the remote coastline near False Entrance as a landing point for a cocaine shipment worth about \$250 million. They made it all the way from South America in a 50-foot fishing boat, then ferried the drugs to the beach in the dead of night before scuttling the boat. However, it seems that the remoteness of False Entrance gave them a false sense of security—the Tactical Response Group, Customs and Fisheries officers arrested them once they had brought all the drugs ashore.

Wildflowers and wildlife

Although the wind-pruned and salt-pruned plants may not appear to be very interesting at first glance, Edsel Land has some rather special flora.



Right Natural Steps at False Entrance beach.

Photo – Cathy Zwick/CALM



Left The rotund sandhill frog lives in the dunes of the proposed national park.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Below left Large mobile dunes are a feature of the Edel Land landscape.
Photo – Cathy Zwick/CALM

Below Four-wheel-drive tracks soon become deeply eroded in this fragile and wind-buffed area.
Photo – Tracy Churchill/CALM

The heaths on Edel Land are a blend of arid and south-western species. There are unusual speargrass (*Stipa*) communities (the only place where such a vegetation community grows), low shrublands of succulents, such as pigface and samphires, and heaths on the Zuytdorp Cliffs. Grey cottonhead, coastal fanflower, coastal spinifex, acacias and blue-flowered hibiscus are common here. A variety of spider orchids appear 3-11 days after the first winter rains. Though the vegetation appears fairly uniform for most of the year, it is a different story in the wildflower season, when it bursts forth in a colourful display. The small circular salt pans, known as birridas, have their own unique spring-flowering annuals, especially samphires,

while the saline creeks and estuaries are lined with white mangroves.

Reptiles live here in large numbers, including at least 12 species of snakes, such as the southern blind snake which reaches the northern limit of its range in Edel Land, spotted sand dragons and goannas. The Shark Bay worm lizard is endemic to Edel Land, where it lives in the pale coastal sands studded with low heath, sheltering beneath leaf litter, limestone slabs, in moist sand under logs and in rotten stumps. Edel Land is the only place where the unusual sandhill frog is common. This rotund but diminutive creature is one of very few frogs that goes through its entire life without ever inhabiting water. Its eggs are laid in the sand and the tadpole stage occurs within the egg.

Emus are relatively uncommon in the area but are sometimes seen. Birds of prey such as ospreys and wedge-tailed eagles are often seen. Ferals include goats, rabbits, cats and low numbers of foxes.

Management

When CALM assumes management of the proposed park, the area's tenure will change from pastoral lease to unallocated Crown land, but regular visitors will see little change in access. People will still be welcome to fish and camp at Steep Point, with camping fees and conditions similar to those at present. Visitor infrastructure and signage along the less-visited Zuytdorp Cliffs should improve, and the area's new status as a park will undoubtedly





draw more people interested in nature-based tourism to the area.

Visitor risk will be a major issue. The high cliffs, potentially slippery rocks and treacherous ocean have claimed relatively few lives, given their dangerous nature, but it will be important for CALM to erect signage warning of the dangers.

Access on Edel Land is a significant management problem. The large sand dunes and extensive sand drifts are highly unstable and prone to erosion. In the past, tracks have become impassable within a relatively short time, with a sequence of new ones being established. In recent years, many of the resulting spider webs of tracks have been closed to allow regeneration. The process of stabilising and rationalising tracks and regenerating old tracks will be a priority for park managers.

Ideally, the new park will remain a wilderness-style destination, offering a sense of adventure and solitude to people who wish to enjoy a relatively untouched part of Australia, steeped in a special beauty all of its own.

Above Hardy survivor, Thunder Bay.
Photo – Michael Pelusey

Above right Steep Point.
Photo – Eva Boogaard/Lochman
Transparencies



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