Marine park proposed for the deep south

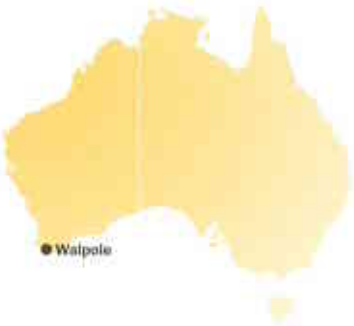
Of the many inlets along the south coast of Western Australia, none is more beautiful or more biologically diverse than the magnificent Walpole and Nornalup inlets. A proposal to declare the area a marine park is close to fruition, with an indicative management plan for the proposed park recently released for public comment.

by Carolyn Thomson-Dans

When William Nairne Clark and his party rowed into Nornalup Inlet—and then up the Deep and Frankland rivers—in 1841, he recorded 'lofty wooded hills, with tall eucalypt trees growing close to the water's edge, and crowning the summits of these high hills, thus casting a deep gloom over the water and making the scenery the most romantic I ever witnessed in other quarters of the globe'.

Early steps were taken to preserve this scenic beauty. Part of the land surrounding the Nornalup Inlet has been reserved since 1910 in what was at one time known as the Nornalup Inlet National Park (later extended and renamed Walpole-Nornalup National Park in 1972) and the inlet system has not been commercially fished for several decades. The relatively undisturbed state of the inlet system no doubt contributes to the excellent recreational fishing opportunities that still abound in the estuary.

The State government established a working group in 1986 to identify representative and unique areas of WA's estuarine and marine waters for consideration as part of a statewide system of marine conservation reserves. The Walpole and Nornalup inlet system was identified by the ensuing report, released in June 1994, as a distinct coastal type with high conservation values. It recommended that the Walpole and Nornalup inlets and the tidal parts of the Frankland, Deep and Walpole rivers be made a marine conservation reserve 'as a matter of high priority'.



Lay of the land

The Walpole and Nornalup inlets lie about 450 kilometres south of Perth on WA's south coast. The town of Walpole is adjacent to the shallow (approximately one metre deep) 100-hectare Walpole Inlet, which is fed by the freshwater Walpole River. The larger (1300-hectare) and deeper (up to five metres) Nornalup Inlet is fed by the freshwater Deep River and the saltier Frankland River. The Deep and Walpole rivers have forested catchments, while 54 per cent of the Frankland headwaters have been cleared for farms, making the run-off water somewhat saline.

The estuaries are joined by a natural one-kilometre-long and two-metre-deep channel, bordered by steep granite hills and rocky shores. These are known locally as 'The Knolls' and are covered with dense karri forest. Other channels have been dredged to allow boats to navigate from the town jetty to the ocean bar. Because the inlet mouth is protected from prevailing winds and swell by an adjacent rocky headland, and due to the high rate of water discharge into the system from the three rivers, the estuaries form the only permanently open estuarine system in the south-west. As a result, the Walpole and Nornalup inlets experience marine-like conditions for most of the year and are more biologically diverse than most estuarine systems in south-western Australia.

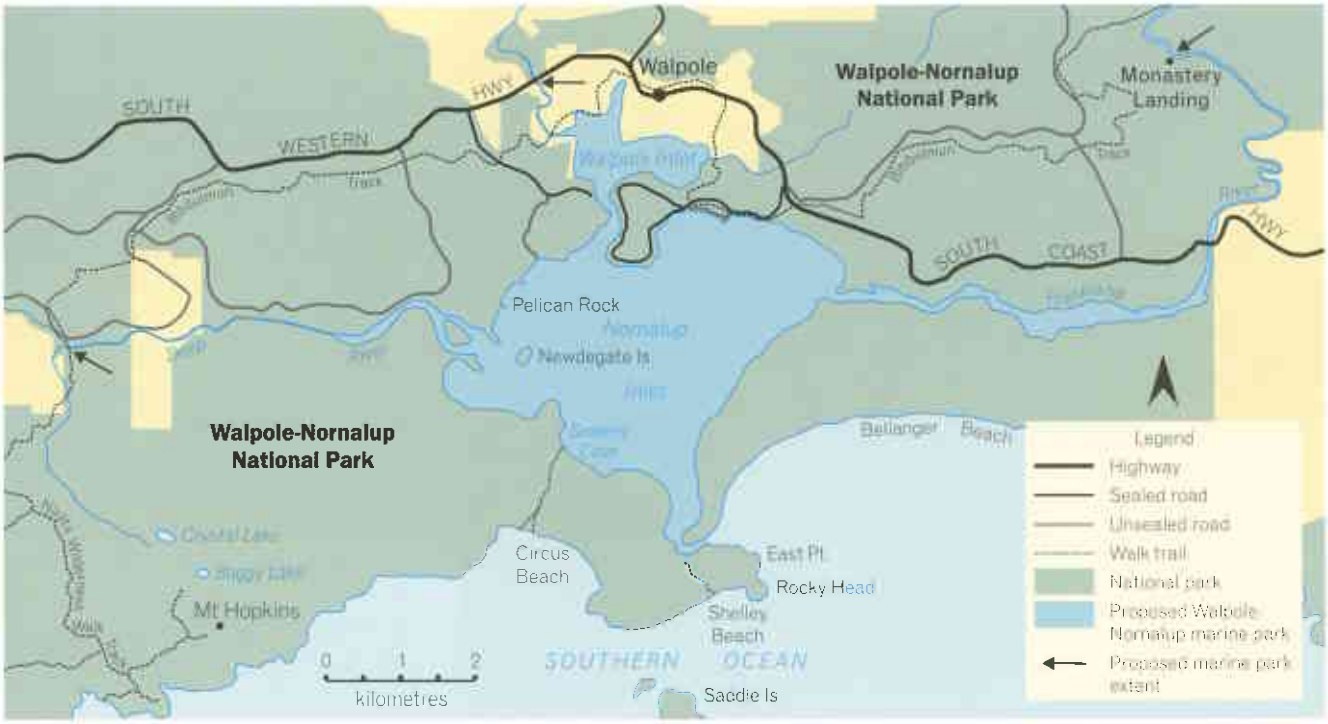
The Deep River of the Sealers

One of the Indigenous tribes that nomadically used the Walpole and Nornalup area was known as the Minang. Remains of rock fish traps can still be found in the inlets. Indigenous people also made spears from young Warren River cedar (*Agonis juniperina*) growing on the shores of the inlets. These people called the area Nor-Nor-Nup, the 'place of the Norne' (black snake). Both dugites and tiger snakes are common around the edges of the inlets.

Even before Albany was established in 1826, sealers, including some ex-

Previous page
Main Nornalup Inlet with 'The Knolls' in the background.
Photo – Alex Bond

Left The mouth of Nornalup Inlet is permanently open to the ocean.
Photo – David Bettini



Left Members of the Muir family on an outing on Nornalup Inlet.
Photo – Courtesy of Alison Muir

convicts from Van Diemans Land (Tasmania), also used the area. Sealers Cove in Nornalup Inlet was probably one of their base camps and a sealer named Isaac is recorded as having lived on nearby Saddle Island with an Aboriginal woman in 1830. Using small boats, they systematically hunted New Zealand fur-seals, whose thick pelts achieved prices of 15 shillings apiece at King George Sound in 1842. The sealers provided French and American whalers with fresh kangaroo meat and local knowledge in return for biscuits, flour and salt pork.

Captain Thomas Bannister and his party skirted the inlet in 1831 when they strayed off route while travelling overland from the Swan River Colony to Albany. Bannister's reports brought William Preston and his party to explore the Walpole–Nornalup area in 1831, followed by surveyor Alfred Hillman and his party in 1833. In February and May 1841, William Nairne Clark and his party rowed into Nornalup seeking 'the Deep River of the Sealers', as it had become known in local lore. Preston and Nairne Clark, in particular, were deeply impressed with the area's scenic grandeur, the friendliness of its Indigenous inhabitants, the abundance of fish in the inlets and the magnificent stands of timber.

Newdegate Island, at the delta of the Deep River, is known locally as Snake Island. In 1845, a group of Englishmen, led by Dr Henry Landor, set up an ill-fated camp on the island. They planned to catch and salt fish for export and to graze cattle and horses. Within a year the venture failed. Two circular fireplaces covered with undergrowth are all that remain of it today.

The first successful settlement of the area began in 1909 when Frenchman Pierre Bellanger and his family took up land beside the Frankland River. The Bellangers also established a tourist attraction in the area, the Nornalup Park Homestead, which provided accommodation, fine food and entertainment in the form of picnics and fishing trips on the river and inlet. In 1911, Frank Skinner Thompson and family settled on the Deep River and established a farm, and later a guest house in 1923 which was very popular with holidaymakers from Perth. In 1926, Tom Swarbrick was granted land at Rest Point, on the western shore of the inlet. A sawmill was established and an eight-bedroom guest house was up and running by 1928. The rest of the district was opened up for settlement through the disastrous Group Settlement Schemes in 1924 and 1927.

Left Tall karri forest along the Deep River, one of the last totally forested river catchments in the south-west.
Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies

Below left A blue swimmer crab eats a shrimp.
Photo – Ann Storrie

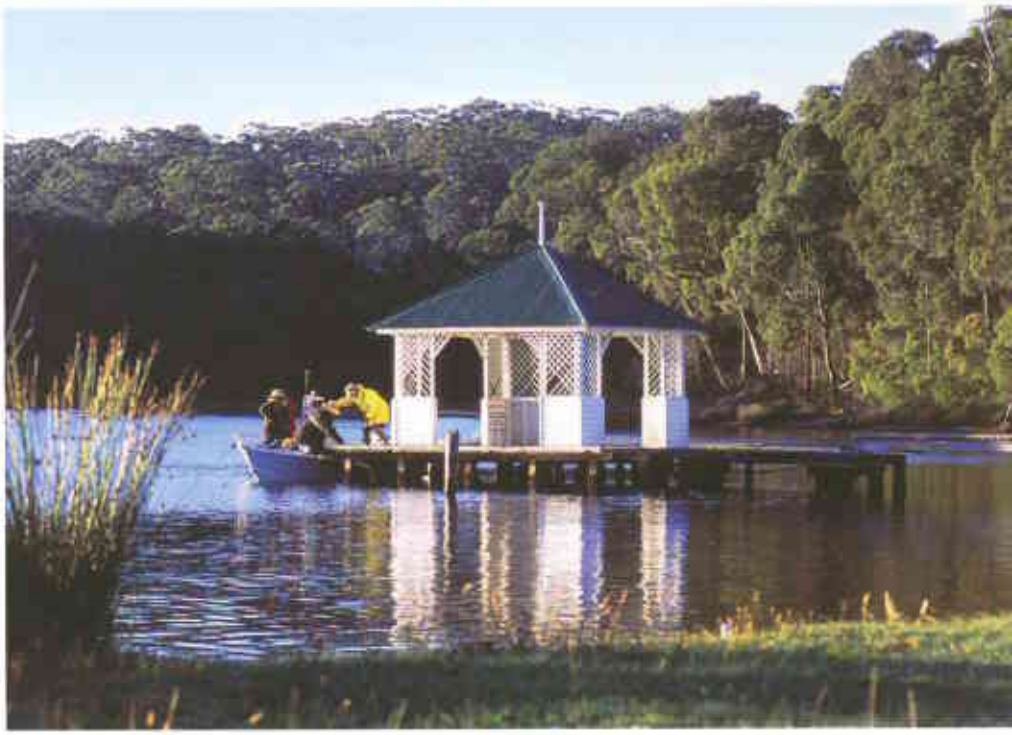
Biological diversity

Surrounded by undulating hills and majestic forests, the tranquil waters of the Walpole and Nornalup inlets support seagrasses, algae, a diverse array of shellfish and other animals living in the estuary floor, both marine and estuarine fish species and a variety of waterbirds, seabirds and shorebirds. Marine worms are abundant throughout the estuary and a number of small aquatic snail species can be found in the fringing rushes. Typical estuarine bivalves such as mussels and trough shells are found near the entrance to the Frankland River. Some prawn species, the blue swimmer crab and mud burrowing crab are also found in the inlets.

The open inlet mouth, the mixing of fresh and salt waters, river deltas and two large inlets result in diverse marine habitats and a great range of fish species. Black bream, whiting, trevally, herring, juvenile Western Australian salmon and even pink snapper are just a few of at least 40 fish species that have been recorded here, including larger fish such as sharks, which are uncommon in other estuaries. The smooth hammerhead shark, southern shovelnose ray, black stingray, eagle ray and gummy shark have all been found in the Walpole and Nornalup inlets. Eagle rays and gummy sharks have been particularly abundant, though gummy sharks are confined to the outer basin of the Nornalup Inlet where salinity is the highest.

A fish with an interesting lifestyle, the pouched lamprey (*Geotria australis*), occurs in its larval stages in the Deep and Walpole rivers, burrowing into the shaded organically-enriched riverbeds for more than four years, before migrating to the ocean via the two inlets. Among the most primitive of living fish, lampreys have a jawless

Above Misty dawn and karri trees on Nornalup Inlet.
Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies



Right Visitors enjoy fishing and camping along the shores of the Walpole and Nornalup inlets. There will be no recreational fishing restrictions in the proposed marine park.
Photo – Tourism WA

mouth that is modified to form a circular suction disc, and have a skeleton of cartilage rather than bone.

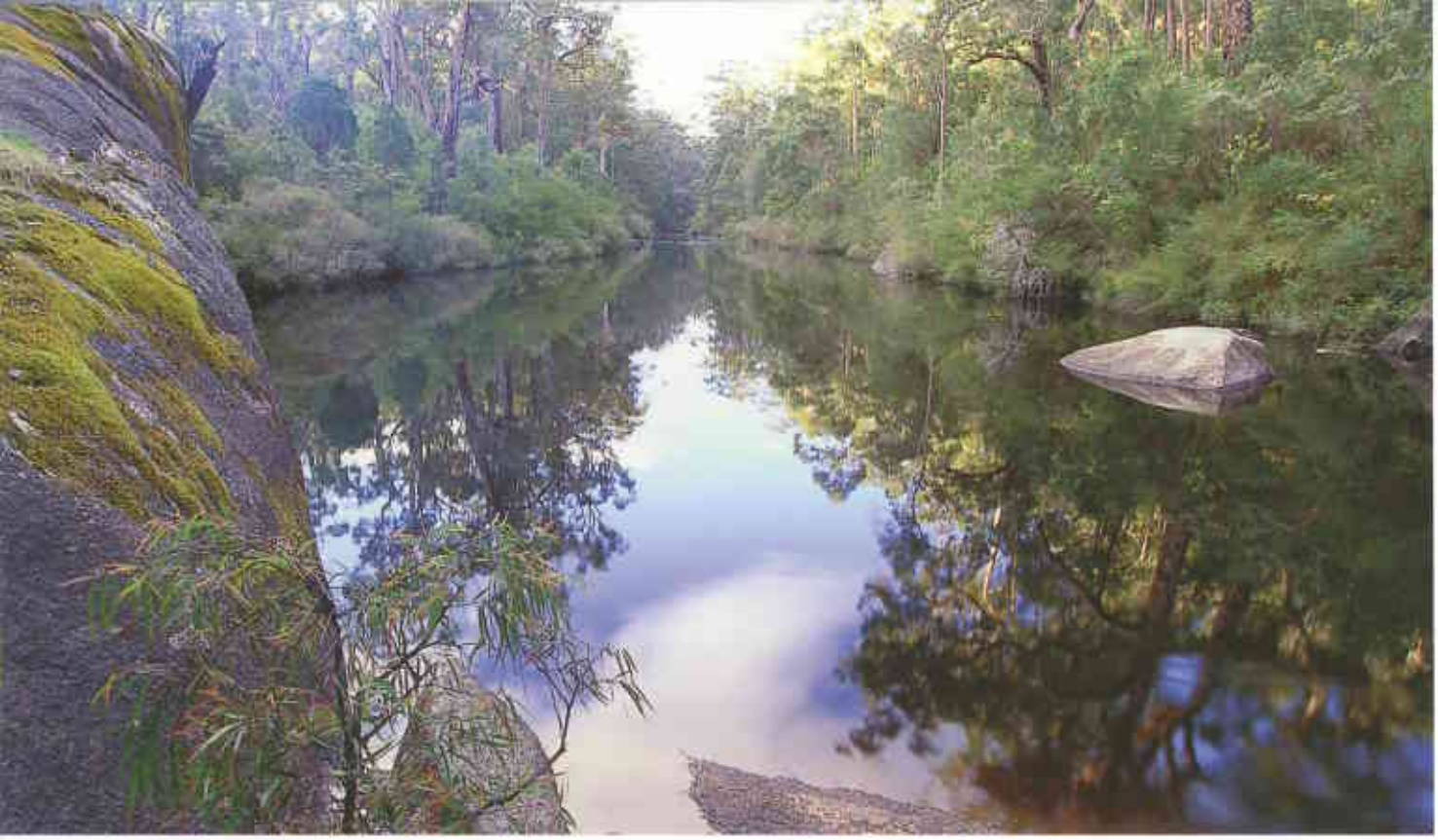
Black swans, ducks, swamphens, moorhens, grebes, coots, cormorants, herons, egrets, Australian pelicans, whimbrels, ibises, sandpipers, stints, oystercatchers and plovers—among other birds—all use the proposed marine park. Gulls and terns are abundant in the area, and shearwaters, gannets and albatrosses may also be observed. Ospreys and white-bellied sea-eagles ply the inlet waters for fish. These large predatory birds are major attractions for nature-based tourism in the inlet system. Migratory shorebirds utilise the tidal delta flats.

Recreation

The natural, wildlife and scenic qualities of the inlets provide a wealth of opportunities for nature-based tourism, canoeing, boating, water sports, nature appreciation and recreational fishing. A major attraction of the inlet system to visitors is the perception of 'wilderness' that can be experienced, particularly in parts of the Nornalup Inlet and the Frankland and Deep rivers.

Management of the proposed marine park will focus on research, monitoring, education and interpretation, and public participation programs. Such programs will allow managers and scientists to gain a better understanding of the estuarine ecosystem, and to assess and manage the impacts of human activities in the area.

The plan, when implemented, will conserve the Walpole and Nornalup inlet system to the approximate limits of tidal influence in the Frankland, Deep and Walpole rivers. The environmental condition of estuaries is closely linked to the condition of surrounding catchments and tributary waterways. The proximity of the adjacent Walpole-Nornalup National Park provides an exceptional opportunity to manage the interconnected terrestrial and



Above Tidal areas of the Deep River will be included in the marine park.
Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies

Below Great crested grebe.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

aquatic ecosystems as a single unit, so the indicative management plan is integrated with the draft management plan for the Walpole Wilderness Area and adjacent parks and reserves.

The indicative management plan proposes to protect the plants and animals and the wilderness character of the area, while allowing visitors to continue to fish, tour and holiday on and around the inlets. It is envisaged that economic benefits of sustainable management of the inlets will flow to the Walpole community. It is important to ensure the local community feels ownership of the inlets, participates in managing the area, and feels confident in their long-term protection.

Vision splendid

The indicative management plan is based on input from a community-based focus group formed in 2003 to assist the former Department of Conservation and Land Managment (now part of the Department of Environment and Conservation) to guide the conservation and management of the proposed Walpole and Nornalup inlets marine park.

The release of the indicative management plan in August 2006 was just one of a raft of recent major marine conservation initiatives. The plan's release was closely followed by the release of an indicative management plan for the proposed Geographe Bay/Leeuwin-Naturaliste/Hardy Inlet marine park. It is anticipated that a final management plan for the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park will be released in early 2007, followed by the final management plan for the proposed Dampier Archipelago Marine Park and Cape Preston Marine Management Area.

The Recherche Archipelago, a 200-kilometre-long smattering of more than 300 islands off the coast of Esperance (see 'Researching the Recherche', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 2003), will be the next area considered for marine reservation, a process that will be undertaken in parallel with a regional marine planning process for the entire south coast of the State.

Western Australia is blessed with a remarkable and unique marine environment. We have a special responsibility to protect and conserve this wonderful marine heritage. A comprehensive, adequate and representative marine reserve system will form a 'string of pearls' (see 'Vision Splendid', *LANDSCOPE*, Spring 2003) gracing our coast. The value of such a marine reserve system will appreciate in years to come, as areas in other parts of the world are affected by ever-increasing population pressures and industrial development. Managed properly, our marine reserves will allow future generations of Western Australians to reap the aesthetic, recreational and economic benefits such a system can confer.

Carolyn Thomson-Dans is a long-time editor and contributor to *LANDSCOPE* and has written and edited numerous departmental publications. She has a special interest in the marine environment. She can be contacted on (08) 9389 8644 or by email (carolyn.thomson-dans@dec.wa.gov.au).

Many thanks to Gary Muir, Lee and Geoff Fernie, Peter Bidwell and Leanne Thompson for their input into the article.

Volume 22 Number 2 SUMMER 2006–2007

contents

Regulars

Publishing credits
Executive editor Kaye Verboon.
Editors Carolyn Thomson-Dans, Rhianna King.
Scientific/technical advice Kevin Kenneally, Paul Jones, Keith Morris.
Design and production David Abel, Maria Duthie, Natalie Jolakoski, Tiffany Taylor, Gooitzen van der Meer.
Illustration Gooitzen van der Meer.
Cartography Promaco Geodraft.
Marketing Estelle de San Miguel
Phone (08) 9334 0296 *Fax* (08) 9334 0432.
Subscription enquiries
Phone (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437.
Prepress and printing Advance Press, Western Australia.
© ISSN 0815 4465

Please do not send unsolicited material, but feel free to contact the editors.

Visit NatureBase at www.naturebase.net

Published by the Department of Environment and Conservation, 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

Department of Environment and Conservation