

PARTNERS IN NATURAL MANAGEMENT

For many years the preservation of our national and marine parks has been focused on protecting biodiversity—the plants, animals and ecosystems. But today, we also work to preserve another and equally important factor—**Aboriginal culture.**

BY SAMILLE MITCHELL AND PETER SHARP

Western Australia's national parks and protected areas boast some of the world's oldest artefacts and artworks. Sunbaked plains are home to flints and grinding stones; caves and rocks in special areas are adorned in ancient art and trees still bear the scars from where boomerangs and shields were once carved.

While the Aboriginal people who left this art and artefacts are now long gone, their knowledge has been passed on through the generations—stories and secrets shared between father and son, mother and daughter.

As a result, many Aboriginal people today remain well versed in the magical Dreaming stories of how the landscape was formed, of the spiritual value of certain sites and the practical uses of seemingly inconspicuous plants for bush tucker or bush medicine. They feel a deep connection with the land of their forefathers, a spiritual sense of belonging.

Considering such knowledge and depth of feeling for their country as well as their responsibilities to their forebears and successors, who better to help in protecting country than the Aboriginal people themselves?

Park councils

Recognising the importance of protecting and respecting Aboriginal culture, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is implementing a joint management policy to involve Aboriginal people in the management of national parks and reserves. This means Aboriginal people will help guide the way their traditional country is protected and made available to visitors.

Key to the policy is the creation of park councils. These councils comprise representatives of Aboriginal traditional owners who collaborate with DEC to make park management decisions and advise the Environment Minister

and the Conservation Commission of WA, in which the parks are vested and that is responsible for management planning. The councils meet about four times a year to decide on matters such as Aboriginal training, employment and enterprises, guidelines for operational management, promotion of cross-cultural knowledge and understanding among park staff and visitors, and capital works including location of buildings, camp sites, roads, tracks, firebreaks and other improvements.

This model began in Karijini National Park in 1995 when an interim park council was formed. The council was mooted in the Karijini National Park Draft Management Plan of 1993 to provide 'a forum for Aboriginal traditional owners to contribute to the development of policy in relation to the park'.

The model has or will be established in Millstream-Chichester (Miliyana), Mitchell River (Ngauwudu), Rudall



River (Karlamilyi), Cape Le Grand, Purnululu, Cape Range and Stirling Range national parks, Gibson Desert and Great Victoria Desert nature reserves, the Burrup Peninsula (Murjuga), Lorna Glen and Earahedy ex-pastoral leases and the six conservation parks of the Ord River Final Agreement.

Aboriginal employment

Another key aspect of joint management is the employment of Aboriginal people. DEC aims to increase its Aboriginal employee numbers from 70 (3.3 per cent of employees) to between 10 to 15 per cent by 2016. The key to this increase is the Mentored Aboriginal Training and Employment Scheme (MATES), which provides Aboriginal people with the chance to undertake cadetships or traineeships. The cadetships enable Aboriginal people to receive financial support for tertiary studies with up to 12 weeks of paid work placements

with DEC available each year. The traineeships provide trainees with the opportunity to work and learn skills on the job while achieving certificates in the conservation and land management discipline as they work towards permanent employment.

There are currently 23 trainees studying Conservation and Land Management Certificates II, III and IV over three years in 16 different work centres across the State and another 12 will be recruited later this year. Since 2002, 21 trainees have completed a Certificate IV and all now have full-time positions with DEC or other environmental organisations.

In addition, there are six cadets currently studying natural resource management-related degrees at university, sponsored through the MATES cadetship project with Department of Employment and Workplace Relations funding. This year, two cadets will graduate from

Above Mitchell Falls, Mitchell River National Park.

Photo – David Bettini

Above inset DEC Trainee Ranger Ken Sandy.

Photo – DEC

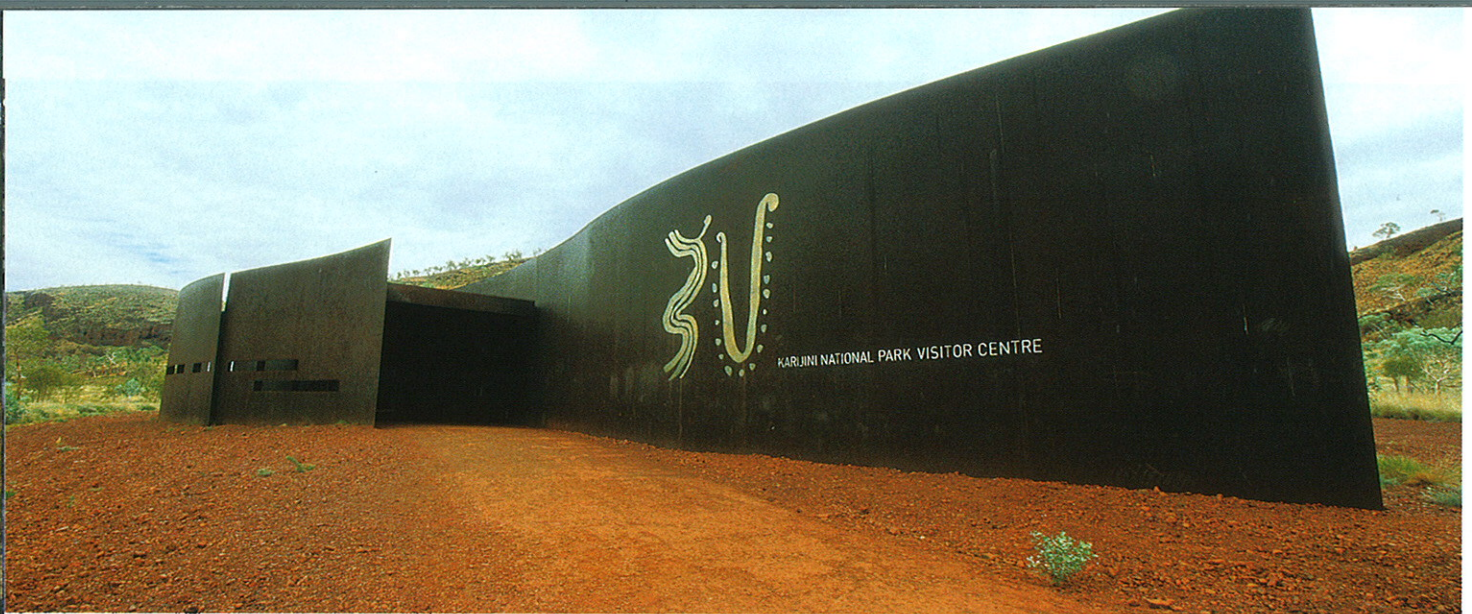
university and both already have full-time positions.

Examples of the results of this push for Indigenous employees is evident at Karijini National Park where Aboriginal people staff the Karijini Visitor Centre, the Gumala Aboriginal Corporation owns the new Karijini Eco Retreat accommodation centre and an Aboriginal Ranger looks after the park.

With increased visitation to the park, it is hoped Aboriginal people will establish further tourism enterprises like guided walks, artists in residence or star gazing tours.

Management benefits

The benefits of a joint management approach can be felt on both sides



Above Karjini Visitor Centre, Karjini National Park.

Photo – Marie Lochman



Left MATES participants at Shark Bay.

Below left Ngaanyatjarra Council members and staff working to fence an important water source in the Goldfields region to protect it from wild camels.

Below far left Indigenous National Park Ranger with a native honeysuckle (*Lambertia* sp.).

Photos – DEC



and other culturally important sites from non-Aboriginal people who might, knowingly or unknowingly, do the wrong thing at those places.

They can also gain employment in locations that might otherwise offer very little opportunity for paid work. And, perhaps most importantly, they can share their culture with the wider world, while working and living in their country.

Millstream-Chichester National Park council member Michael Woodley puts it this way:

“Miliyana (Millstream) is where my heart is. It’s where the heart of all Yindjibarndi people is. If you ask any Yindjibarndi about Millstream they will say look, this is where it all starts”.

of the management equation. DEC benefits from knowledge built up over millennia—information about people, plants and animals and their roles in keeping country healthy.

Such knowledge can provide a real boon to cultural tourism. Through interpretative material, visitors to joint-managed parks can learn about Aboriginal culture, how the landscapes were created according to Dreaming stories and of traditional uses of plants and animals for food and medicine.

DEC also gleans important information on fire management from Aboriginal people. Long regarded as experts on fire management to aid biodiversity, Aboriginal people used

traditional firestick techniques to regenerate the land, prevent wildfires and promote native flora and fauna growth. They used fire for multiple purposes year round and, while the landscape has changed since European settlement with the introduction of new animals, plants and technologies, the use of firestick techniques and applications in protected areas like national parks makes good sense.

On the other side of the equation, Aboriginal people also benefit from joint management. They are formally involved in a partnership with DEC to manage and care for their traditional country. They have a say in protecting sacred sites, law grounds, burial places

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