



Natural wonderland in the arid Pilbara

With a rich Aboriginal history, spectacular escarpments and winding tree-lined watercourses, Millstream-Chichester National Park is an ancient landscape with a living culture and a haven for wildlife. The protection of these unique features will be guided by a new management plan.



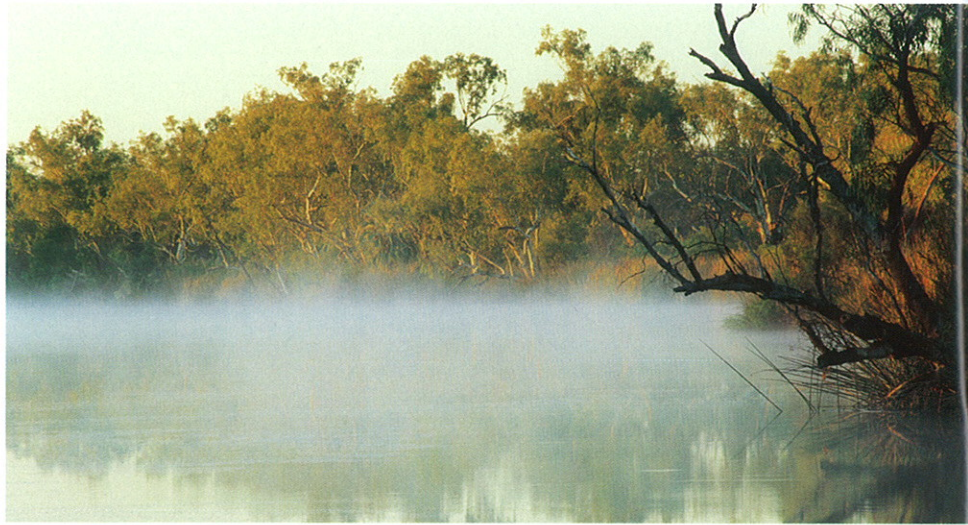
by Samille Mitchell

Long, long ago, during the Dreamtime, creation spirits sculpted the stunning environs of the Millstream-Chichester National Park. Local Indigenous people believe these spirits rose from the ground, lifted the sky and the world from the sea and, together with the sky god and the first men, moulded the landscape from a once soft and malleable earth.

The spirits, known as Marrga, still live in the rocky mountains and gullies of the region today. Aboriginal people say, if you look carefully enough, you can see the mist of the Marrga's breakfast fires hanging over the water in the mornings.

The sea serpent Warlu added to the Marrga's creations, travelling through the land and adorning it with the many fresh, deep-water pools for which the region is renowned. The Warlu still inhabits the deep waters of Deep Reach on the Fortescue River today. Such was the extent of the serpent and spirit creations here that the area is regarded as possibly the most mythologically important in the State.

A new draft management plan for the national park has been finalised and recognises this rich Indigenous heritage and protects the area's spectacular landscape.



An ancient landscape

If there is one thing that sets the Millstream-Chichester National Park apart, it is the water. The park is renowned for its oasis-like pools, native palms and streams, set amid a harsh red Pilbara landscape. This water has sparked the long Aboriginal relationship with the land, lured European explorers and pastoralists and brought about a diverse range of flora and fauna.

The freshwater pools near the visitor centre are fed by a natural aquifer within the Fortescue River catchment—something of a geological marvel considering the otherwise dry

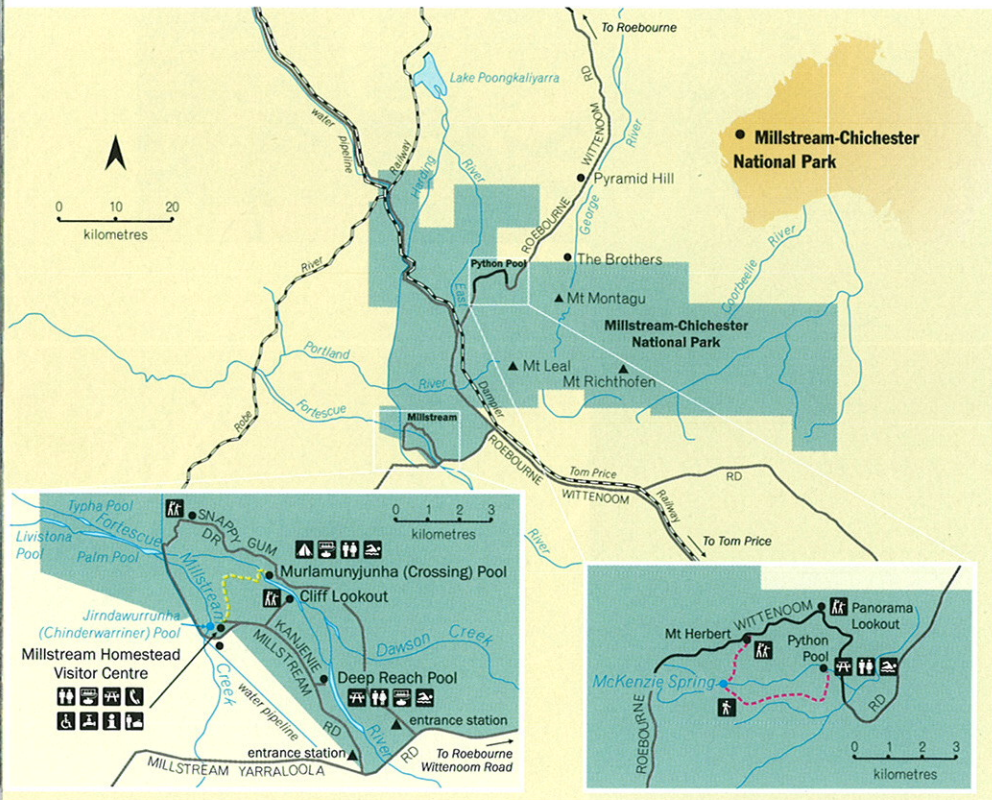
nature of the landscape. The Fortescue River also flows through the region and is particularly scenic at Millstream where red rocky cliffs overlook green waters reflecting the towering gums which crowd the river bank.

Such a water supply has created a number of ecosystems unique to the area, including sedgelands and woodlands of cadjeput and Millstream palm. The palms are a relic from a tropical rainforest that has since retreated, after the climate became drier and more arid five to 10 million years ago.

The geology of the region is of volcanic origin and is around two billion years old. The current landscape is the result of long periods of erosion which sculpted the land to form the ranges and plains which adorn the area today.

History

Aboriginal people are thought to have inhabited the Pilbara for the past 25,000 years. In the Millstream area, the Yindjibarndi people occupied land from the foot of the Hamersley Range across the Fortescue River and through the Chichester escarpment. The Ngarluma people lived in the region stretching from the Chichester escarpment northward to the sea.



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Main Millstream-Chichester National Park.

Photo – David Bettini

Inset Spinifex pigeon.

Photo – Cliff Winfield

Above Morning mist on Deep Reach in the Fortescue River.

Photo – Jiri Lochman



Above Python Pool from above.

Right Python Pool.
Photos – David Bettini

Millstream itself is of particular cultural importance—being home to the Warlu serpent—and has also acted as an important meeting and camping place across the millennia. Walk around the area today and you can still see flaked stone artefacts, grindstones, mollusc shells, rock art and trees from which boomerangs were cut—signs of the countless generations of Indigenous people who have lived here.

Millstream's oasis-like pools and waterways also lured Europeans. Explorer Francis Gregory passed through the region in 1861 and recorded "a fine tributary from the south, running strong enough to supply a large mill". The area was consequently named Mill Stream.

Pastoralists later followed, with the first land on the Fortescue River taken up by Mr W Taylor in 1865. The area remained pastoral until 1967 when parts of Millstream and the Chichester Range were declared national parks.

In 1982 the Public Works Department bought the Millstream Station lease from the Kennedy family to use the area's water for a public water supply. Since 1968, groundwater pumped from the Millstream Dolomite aquifer has been used as a public water supply for towns in the west Pilbara. However, since construction



of the Harding Dam, it is now used only when the dam's water quality or quantity is insufficient.

After the lease purchase, part of the original station was used to join the Millstream National Park with the Chichester National Park, creating one large protected area.

Management

The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) jointly manages the Millstream-Chichester National Park with the Aboriginal people whose ancestors have lived here for thousands of years.

A park council of Aboriginal elders (see 'Partners in natural management' on page 20) provides advice and

direction on how to best manage and protect the land, especially in regard to culturally important sites, and is actively involved in management issues.

This joint-management approach recognises Aboriginal people's strong relationship with the area. It also enables the park council to highlight the spiritual importance of the landscape to visitors, by proving interpretative information on the park's rich cultural and mythological heritage. Indigenous staff also work in the national park helping to look after their traditional lands as their ancestors have done for centuries.

In addition to joint management, DEC is preparing a management plan which maps out management direction for the park over the next 10 years. The



plan recommends projects to control weeds, extend research on wildlife, improve camping facilities, extend and add walk trails and upgrade the visitor centre.

Millstream-Chichester National Park will also become part of the new Warlu Way drive trail which extends from Ningaloo, through Karijini and Millstream and onto Murujuga and Broome. Interpretative signage along the trail will help to open travellers' eyes to the area's rich Indigenous history and its natural wonders.

Visiting Millstream-Chichester National Park

Visitors to the park will find the bulk of tourism infrastructure near the old homestead. The original building has been converted into a visitor centre, complete with information on the natural wonders of the area and artefacts and stories from its Indigenous and pastoral history.

Signage on a walk from the homestead around the nearby Jirndawurrunha Pool gives an insight into pastoral life here in the words of former resident and pastoralist Doug Gordon through his memories as a 12-year-old. The walk meanders through the shade of introduced date palms and gums and by babbling streams and crystal clear pools, complete with lily pads (also introduced) and colourful dragon flies.

The 6.8-kilometre Murlamunyunha Trail also sets out from here and finishes at Crossing Pool. A second trail leads off to Cliff Lookout, with views over Crossing Pool on the Fortescue River.

Top left Storm approaching Pyramid Hill, bordering Millstream-Chichester National Park.

Photo – Alex Bond

Centre left Little corellas feeding on Millstream palm fruits.

Photo – David Bettini

Centre right A little red kaluta eating a centipede.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Left Millstream-Chichester National Park Trainee Ranger Ken Sandy shows a tree from which a boomerang was once cut.

Photo – Samille Mitchell

Right The former Millstream Station homestead is today the visitor centre.
Photo – Samille Mitchell

Below right Walking along the Murlamunjunha Trail.
Photo – Michael Pelusey

From here you can truly appreciate the immensity of this inland waterway. The white branches of gums stand in stark contrast to the red earth and are beautifully reflected in the water. Visitors can also camp at Crossing Pool.

Camping is also available from a new campsite called Miliyana, opposite the homestead. A new camp kitchen has been constructed here, styled in the fashion of the homestead's old kitchen. A domed corrugated iron roof shelters the barbecue, table and sink. You will also find a pretty day-use site at Deep Reach—just the spot to enjoy a picnic by the water. It is here that the Warlu continues to reside.

Venturing further afield, be sure to visit Python Pool. This emerald pool at the beginning of the Chichester Range is embraced by towering red-walled cliffs. From Mount Herbert, you can set out on a 16-kilometre return walk down to Python Pool called the Chichester Range Camel Trail. The walk affords great views of the flat-topped hills or mesas of the Chichester Range. They glow brilliant red in the late afternoon sun while their spinifex cloak transforms into hues of gold.

A living land

Millstream-Chichester National Park's extensive water supplies mean the area is home to an array of plant life. Some 435 species of native plants have been recorded in the area, representing 70 families and 173 genera. The flora is used by the Aboriginal people of the area for food, medicine, materials and shelter as well as for implements, weapons and ornaments.

The permanent pools at Millstream have created refuges for water-dependent flora which are otherwise uncommon in the dry Pilbara. Plants more typical of tropical areas to the north are also found here.

Of course such flora provide habitat for fauna species. Some 36 species of

mammals have been recorded in the area, with bats making up the biggest group—16 species from five families have been recorded. The region is also home to 10 carnivorous (dasyurid) marsupial species, four of which are endemic to Western Australia. There are also three kangaroo species, five rodents, one possum species and the echidna. Of the 36 species, three are endemic to the Pilbara—the little red kaluta, Rory's pseudoantechinus and the pebble mound mouse.

A diverse range of birds can also be seen here, with 146 species recorded, including 38 species of waterbird. Species include the white faced heron, the Australian pelican, the little black cormorant, the glossy ibis and the sacred kingfisher.

Millstream-Chichester National Park is also home to a wide assortment of reptiles and amphibians. Researchers have recorded 97 species of such fauna here, including 27 skink species, 14 gecko species and 12 snake species, including the giant olive python. The area's waters are also home to the flat-shelled turtle and eight species of frog. Of these reptile and amphibian species, 15 are endemic to the Pilbara.

With so much water, the area is also home to fish species. Some 11 species have been recorded here, with most found at Millstream.

The diverse range of animals is also significant to the Aboriginal people of the area, having provided food, clothing, decorations for ceremonies, pets and hunting companions. Animals were also important spiritually and different species have a place in the Yindjibarndi kinship system. They are also the subject of Dreaming songs and stories.



Planning for the future

The Millstream-Chichester National Park Draft Management Plan is due to be released for public comment to ensure the protection of this culturally and naturally rich area. The plan and others like it are examples of how DEC consults with the community, researches an area and affords protection to important regions through long-term planning for the future.

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