Walpole Wilderness

A vast area of land in the south-west was unofficially declared the Walpole Wilderness in 2001. This resulted in the establishment of several new national parks, branding and further protection for the area. Now the area is subject to a management plan which, when released, will pave the way for a formal declaration of this spectacular and nature-rich place.

by Samille Mitchell

The Walpole Wilderness embraces more than 363,000 hectares of Western Australia's south-west with a beautiful tapestry of rushing river ways, gnarled trees, rising mists and wild coast. Rare and threatened plants and animals, many found nowhere else in the world, inhabit the rolling landscapes and the rivers, inlets, wetlands and the ocean are home to a riot of species, including humpback and southern right whales, which annually patrol the coast.

Here towering stands of tingle trees provide a window into the forest's ancient past—the trees and their surrounding environment are reminiscent of the grand rainforests that once characterised the now-dry Australian continent. Indeed, walk among the towering trees, listen to the screech of birds, smell the damp earth at your feet and it's easy to imagine you are walking through an ancient land. Such are the natural values of this landscape that the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) has written and is now planning the launch of a management plan for the area—a move that will guide the protection of this natural environment now and into the future.

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Main Snake Gully on the Great Forest Tree Drive, Shannon National Park—part of the Walpole Wilderness.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk.
Photo – Trevor Burslem

Right View of the coast west of Peaceful Bay, Walpole-Nornalup National Park.
Photo – Marie Lochman

What is the Walpole Wilderness?

The Walpole Wilderness covers the vast area of forests and other landscapes between Walpole, Denmark and Rocky Gully, taking in nature reserves, forest conservation areas and seven national parks—Mount Frankland, Mount Frankland North, Mount Frankland South, Mount Roe, Mount Lindesay, Shannon and Walpole-Nornalup. It is also home to the soon-to-be-declared Walpole and Nornalup Inlets Marine Park. Within this region, two areas will be gazetted as 'core wilderness'. In these areas, access is only by foot or canoe, and there are no marked trails. In contrast, three sites have been set aside for higher level visitation and collectively named the 'Walpole Wilderness Discovery Centre'.

These sites—the Valley of the Giants, Mount Frankland and Swarbrick—feature attractions designed to enhance human interaction with the natural environment. They provide visitors with the opportunity to find inspiration and enjoyment from nature while also gaining an understanding of natural and cultural stories of the area.

The Valley of the Giants

The Valley of the Giants is perhaps the best known of the three sites that make up the Walpole Wilderness Discovery Centre. It is home to the Tree Top Walk, which features a stunning walkway positioned 40 metres above the ground amid the dizzying heights of the tingle forest canopy. A boardwalk meandering across the forest floor called the Ancient Empire also features here, enabling visitors to explore the forest floor without damaging the environment they've come to admire.

More recently, an interactive discovery centre and outdoor classroom have also been developed at the Valley of the Giants to further inspire and educate visitors about the wilderness. The centre includes an interpretive display with an extensive mural depicting the Walpole Wilderness from the hinterland to the inlet. Inclined panels tell the stories of wilderness people and wildlife over time. A 'naturalist's diary' showcases invertebrates that once lived here, including the 'giant' tingle spider, centipede, 'roly poly' millipede, bull ants, elephant weevil, frogs, spring beetle and an ancient slug-like creature known as a 'big foot'. Descendents of these creatures survive today, but are much smaller than their super-sized ancestors.

Visitors can also view a large map of the Walpole Wilderness with press button lights to locate sites of significance and site-related pictures. Globes of the Earth reveal the evolution of the landscape and wildlife by showing the effects of continental drift and climate change—hints to

Background above Ancient Empire.
Photo – DEC

Right View from Mount Frankland.
Photo – Michael Pelusey

the origins of the species which live in the Walpole Wilderness today. In addition, a 3-D viewer provides a remarkable perspective of wildflowers and common invertebrates in the area.

While the area is well set up to cater to visitors today, it was not always the case. Years ago, visitors would drive their cars into a well-known, hollowed-out tingle tree at a picnic spot to take photos. The site became so popular that by 1989 the number of visitors had reached 100,000 a year. Sadly, the tree's age, combined with visitor impacts over the decades, contributed to its eventual demise.

The death of this famous tingle made it clear that the remaining trees in the Valley of the Giants needed protection. As such, the then Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) envisaged the Ancient Empire boardwalk and the Tree Top Walk.

Swarbrick

The Walpole Wilderness Discovery Centre site at Swarbrick, about 10 minutes drive north from Walpole, features forest art exhibits which celebrate the changing perceptions of forest and wilderness over time. It was chosen as a site for its towering stands of karri trees and because of its role in the fierce, anti old-growth forest logging debate which gripped Western Australia in the 1990s and early 2000s. On the strength of the debate, the then opposition Labor leader, Dr Geoff Gallop, visited Swarbrick during logging operations and proposed the creation of the Walpole Wilderness. The issue was a turning point in the 2001 election, which was won by the Labor party.

In developing the Walpole Wilderness Discovery Centre at Swarbrick, planners envisioned an area that fired passion about wilderness through art. As such, 16 artists submitted concepts which combined their artistic

interpretation of the area's history with their perception of wilderness. From there, three artists were asked to further develop their concepts and two artists, Lorenna Grant and Alan Clarke, were commissioned to develop artworks. The result is a selection of art exhibits along a 500-metre return walk through the old-growth karri forest. The walk also takes you past a 'wilderness wall of perception'. The 25-metre long and three-metre high stainless steel wall of perception features more than 30 forest-related quotations from the past 100 years, with dates of political events relevant to logging and the wilderness.

The artwork ranges from a sculpture depicting Aboriginal message sticks to a giant suspended ring called the Torus through which the artists prompt the visitor to explore the interconnectedness of all living things.

Mount Frankland

The Mount Frankland Walpole Wilderness Discovery Centre site, about 30 minutes drive north of Walpole, marks the boundary between vast tracts of pristine bush in the wilderness to the north and the human-occupied areas to the south. The site will feature interpretive information panels which provide insights into the wilderness area through the eyes of a tower man—the person responsible for manning the fire lookout on top of Mount Frankland to scan for fires. During summer, the summit of Mount Frankland continues to be used as a fire lookout tower.

A wheelchair-accessible boardwalk will be built during 2008-2009 to provide sweeping views over the wilderness. Those seeking to better explore the wilderness here can set out on one of two walk trails. One circles the base of Mount Frankland while the other climbs to the summit. While the summit walk is strenuous, the views on a clear day sweep from the Porongurup and Stirling ranges in the east, south to the Southern Ocean.

Natural wonders

The Walpole Wilderness is treasured for its wild coast, untouched wilderness and majestic forest. Here, stands of jarrah, marri and karri trees tower high above the earth and tingle trees delight visitors with their gnarled appearance. The red, yellow and Rates tingles are relicts from ancient times. Some 65 million years ago, when Australia was part of the supercontinent Gondwanaland, the climate was warm and continuously wet. However, the gradual drying of Australia marked the end for many flora species. But in the Walpole-Nornalup area, which has the wettest and least seasonal climate in the south-west, the ancestors of today's tingle trees survived.

The survival of these trees also enabled the survival of invertebrate species which hark back to primitive times. They include the tingle spider (*Moggridgea tingle*) and other spider species (*Baalebulb* and *Dandarnus*), primitive snails, and the ancient *Peripatus*, which is a living link between worms and arthropods. Related species survive in the rainforests of Tasmania, eastern Australia, New Zealand, Chile and Madagascar—far flung places that were once united as Gondwana.

The human past

This area of rich natural value was important to Aboriginal people who lived in the region nomadically. One of these groups was known as Murrum, and the remains of their rock fish traps can still be found in the inlets. Aboriginal people also made spears from young Warren River cedar growing on the shores of the inlets. These people called the area Nornalup, meaning 'place of the black snake'.

It wasn't until the 1600s that Europeans first sighted the area. The *Gulden Zeepaard* (Golden Seahorse), a Dutch East India Ship, sailed along the south coast in 1627 and then, in 1831, Captain Thomas Bannister and his party came across the Nornalup Inlet when they strayed off route while travelling

Below Wilderness wall of perception.
Photo – Michael Pelusey

Above Fernhook Falls, Walpole.
Photo – David Bettini

overland from the Swan River Colony to Albany.

William Nairne Clark and his party visited 10 years later, rowing into Nornalup and describing the areas around the Deep and Frankland rivers:

> "The sail up was truly delightful. The river actually appeared to be embosomed amongst lofty wooded hills, with tall eucalypt trees 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 the other quarters of the globe".

European settlement started in the mid 1850s when settlers from further inland began to drive cattle down to coastal areas in the present Walpole-Nornalup National Park for summer grazing. Stock camps were established along the coast. You can still see part of one camp at Crystal Springs. Permanent settlement began in 1910 when Frenchman Pierre Bellanger and his family took up land beside the Frankland River.

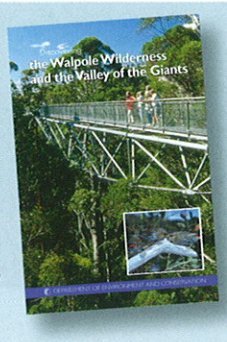
The same year Premier James Mitchell visited the Frankland River and, impressed by its beauty, he created the Walpole-Nornalup National Park. Such a move proved highly important in preserving the region's natural values as, by the 1920s, land was being extensively cleared for agriculture under the Group Settlement Scheme. These schemes, promoted by Premier Mitchell, were intended to create a flourishing agricultural community that would create livelihoods for unemployed men and their families. They provided enough population growth for the development of the town of Walpole, which began as a tent, tin and bush pole shanty town in 1930. At first called Nornalup, the name was changed to Walpole in 1934.

In 1951 logging began in earnest—an important industry that continued until 1995, providing employment for many residents. But the anti-logging movement of the 1990s contributed to the decline of the timber industry in Walpole and a consequent fall in employment. On top of this, increasing numbers of visitors led CALM to seek more innovative ways of enabling visitors to experience the natural environment in the area without damaging it. A result of these combined factors was the development of the Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk, which opened in 1996. This facility stamped Walpole firmly on the State's tourism map and helped turn around the fortunes of the coastal township, where tourism is now a major industry.

By 2004, the creation of the new national parks and reserves in the Walpole Wilderness further added to the protection of this magnificent area. Now, with a management plan being prepared, the Walpole Wilderness will be preserved for many generations to come.

Samille Mitchell is a *LANDSCOPE* Editor and Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) Publications Officer. She can be contacted on (08) 9389 8644 or by email (samille.mitchell@dec.wa.gov.au).

The information in this article is based on the pocket-sized field guide *Discovering the Walpole Wilderness and the Valley of the Giants* which was written and researched by DEC district and regional staff. The book is available for $6.50 from bookshops and tourist outlets, by phoning WA Naturally Publications on (08) 9334 0437, or by ordering online at www.naturebase.net.



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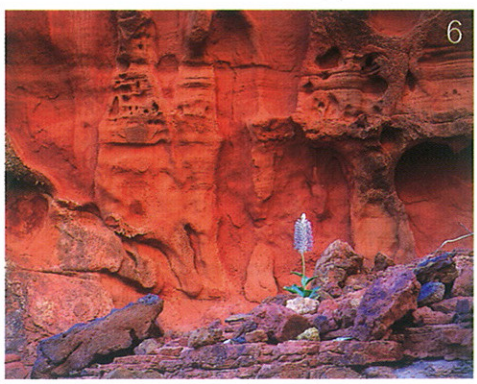
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