



by Samille Mitchell

World Heritage:

protecting the world's most treasured places

HERITAGE · PATRIMONY

Shark Bay's riot of marine wonders and Purnululu National Park's geological marvels may not appear to have much in common. But these two areas are blessed with the title of a World Heritage Area—a prestigious crown awarded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) that recognises the world's most treasured natural and cultural places.

Now the Ningaloo Coast is being nominated for consideration as a World Heritage Area (look out for an article on what makes this area worthy of nomination in the next edition of *LANDSCOPE*). But what exactly is a World Heritage Area and what are the benefits of bearing this coveted and internationally recognised title?



World Heritage beginnings

In 1972, worldwide concern over the potential destruction of the Earth's cultural and natural heritage led UNESCO to establish an international treaty called the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. More commonly known as the World Heritage Convention, the treaty aims to identify, celebrate and protect the Earth's irreplaceable natural and cultural

heritage, and to ensure it is conserved for all people, for all time.

UNESCO's World Heritage Committee started listing World Heritage sites—places it considered to be among the best possible examples of cultural and natural heritage in the world. To date, there are 878 sites across the globe, of which 679 are recognised for their cultural value, 174 are recognised for their natural value and 25 for their mixed cultural and natural values. Australia has 17 sites on the World Heritage list—11 recognised for their natural attributes, four sites listed for both natural and cultural attributes and two cultural sites (see box on page 8).

In the words of the World Heritage Centre staff:

"Heritage is our legacy from the past,



World Heritage listing ensures recognition and protection to some of the world's most outstanding natural and cultural places. Western Australia boasts two World Heritage Areas recognised for their natural values and another is being put forward for consideration for listing.

what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. They are our touchstones, our points of reference, our identity. What makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located."

Because of its international recognition, World Heritage listing can prove a major boost to tourism in the area—something which can produce flow-on benefits for nearby communities in terms of economic injections, improved visitor interpretation and supply of other facilities. And, because parties to the World Heritage Convention are

obliged to protect and maintain their country's heritage, World Heritage listing also affords enhanced protection to an area. In the case of WA, there is an international, Commonwealth and State commitment to protecting World Heritage Areas such as Shark Bay and Purnululu.

Why Shark Bay and Purnululu?

Shark Bay World Heritage Area is one of only 20 places across the globe that satisfies all four of the natural criteria for World Heritage listing (most meet only one or two categories). It has superlative natural phenomena, it displays the major stages in the Earth's evolutionary history, it has outstanding examples of significant ongoing ecological and biological processes and it contains important

Main Piccaninny Creek, Purnululu National Park.

Photo – Bill Bachman

Insets from left

Ningaloo Marine Park.

Photo – Alex Steffe/Lochman

Transparencies

Zuytdorp cliffs at Shark Bay.

Photo – Marie Lochman

Cape Range National Park wildlife.

Photo – Damon Annison

and significant habitats for conserving biological diversity. Key to meeting this criteria are the area's stunning natural beauty, its stromatolites—which provide keys to the earliest life on Earth—its extensive seagrass meadows and its rich suites of native plants and animals, many of them threatened and unique to the area. A recently launched draft management plan on



Australian World Heritage Areas and year of declaration

Cultural World Heritage Areas

- Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens, Vic (2004)
- Sydney Opera House, NSW (2007)

Natural World Heritage Areas

- Australian Fossil Mammal Sites (Riversleigh/Naracoorte), Qld (1994)
- Fraser Island, Qld (1992)
- Gondwana Rainforests of Australia, Qld (1986)
- Great Barrier Reef, Qld (1981)
- Greater Blue Mountains Area, NSW (2000)

- Heard and McDonald Islands, Southern Ocean (1997)
- Lord Howe Island Group, NSW (1982)
- Macquarie Island, Tas (1997)
- Purnululu National Park, WA (2003)
- Shark Bay, WA (1991)
- Wet Tropics of Queensland (1988)

Mixed cultural and natural World Heritage Areas

- Kakadu National Park, NT (1981)
- Tasmanian Wilderness, NT (1982)
- Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, NT (1987)
- Willandra Lakes Region, NSW (1981)



'The Shark Bay Terrestrial Reserves and Proposed Reserves Additions' suggests future management guidelines for conservation lands in this biologically significant area.

The Shark Bay World Heritage Area is afforded additional protection through DEC-managed parks—Shark Bay Marine Park and Francois Peron National Park—which lie within the World Heritage Area boundaries.

Hundreds of kilometres to the north, Purnululu National Park in

the Kimberley was selected for World Heritage listing for two reasons—the area's stunning natural beauty and its outstanding geological value. Here, visitors are inspired by massive beehive-like sandstone domes of the Bungle Bungle Range, which tower 250 metres high (see this issue's feature park on page 40).

UNESCO rated the park's Bungle Bungle Range as "by far, the most outstanding example of cone karst in sandstone anywhere in the world".

Although the aesthetic beauty of this area was not widely publicised until the 1980s, the World Heritage Area listing afforded in 2003 has helped ensure it is now internationally recognised as a natural icon of Australia.

With plans afoot to nominate the Ningaloo Coast for similar recognition, this area too may soon enjoy the prestige and recognition that go hand in hand with World Heritage Area listing.



Above left Sandstone domes of the Bungle Bungle Range.
Photo – David Bettini

Above Birridas (clay pans) in Francois Peron National Park.
Photo – DEC

Left Stromatolites at Shark Bay.
Photo – Eva Boogaard/Lochman Transparencies

Below The white pigface is the only species with white flowers found in Shark Bay.
Photo – Andrew Brown/DEC



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Publishing credits

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Scientific/technical advice Kevin Kenneally, Paul Jones, Chris Simpson, Keith Morris.
Design and production Natalie Jolakoski, Tiffany Taylor, Gooitzen van der Meer.
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Marketing Cathy Birch
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Subscription enquiries Phone (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437.
Prepress and printing Lamb Print, Western Australia.

© ISSN 0815-4465

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Visit www.dec.wa.gov.au

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



Department of Environment and Conservation

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