



Warlu Way



A new tourism initiative celebrates the rich Aboriginal culture of the Gascoyne, Pilbara and Kimberley. The Warlu Way self-drive trail is designed to encourage visitation to the area by linking national parks and towns in the region. It will also feature interpretive signage along the way to explain the historical tales and natural secrets of this ancient landscape.

by Samille Mitchell

The way of the warlu, or sea serpent, traverses an ancient and sacred land rich in natural beauty and enchanting Aboriginal stories. This 2,480-kilometre self-drive journey takes travellers through Western Australia's Gascoyne, Pilbara and Kimberley regions—areas resplendent with sapphire seas, soaring gorges, ancient Aboriginal art, rugged ranges and inland oases. Travellers will encounter interpretive signage as they travel, further opening their eyes to the secrets of this country and its historical, cultural and natural wonders.

Ocean to outback

Visitors start their journey on the shores of the Ningaloo Marine Park in the towns of Coral Bay and Exmouth. Here, visitors are encouraged to explore the dazzling underwater gardens of the Ningaloo Reef, visit the plunging canyons of Cape Range National Park and find out about the area's natural attractions at the Milyering Visitor Centre in Exmouth. The mighty whale shark—the world's biggest fish—is a major attraction here when populations of the harmless giant visit from about March to June each year.

From the coast the drive meanders inland to townships born from the

riches of the State's mineral resources boom. Townsites like Tom Price, Newman and Paraburdoo have sprung up since the 1960s, supporting flourishing populations of people who work for mining companies that extract rich supplies of iron ore from the red earth.

Next on the agenda is one of Warlu Way's major attractions—the spectacular Karijini National Park. This park is famed for its plummeting gorges, sometimes thundering waterfalls and deep pools. At some places the gorges are so narrow you can reach out and touch their walls with both hands. At others they are yawning chasms of red rock, adorned with the gnarled plants clinging to sheer cliff face. Karijini is also rich in Aboriginal culture and history. Warlu Way travellers can learn much about this history, as well as the park's fascinating geology, at the Karijini Visitor Centre.

An ancient culture

From Karijini, Warlu Way returns west to Millstream-Chichester National Park (see 'Natural wonderland in the arid Pilbara', *LANDSCOPE*, Spring 2007). This park is truly an oasis in the desert. The mighty Fortescue River meanders through the landscape at

Millstream and flat-topped, spinifex-cloaked hills form the Chichester Range. Millstream also features pools fed by an underground aquifer to create an enchanting environment of water lilies, dragonflies and birds.

The area is also of immense importance to the Yindjibarndi people who have lived here across the millennia. They would gather at the pools to camp near what became the Millstream homestead, and is today the visitor centre. Walk around Millstream today and you can still see flaked stone artefacts, grindstones, mollusc shells, rock art and trees from which boomerangs were cut many years ago.

Millstream is also of mythological importance for a pool on the Fortescue River called Deep Reach or Nhanggangunha. The waters here are home to the mighty warlu after which the drive was named (see 'The warlu – an almighty sea serpent' on page 28).

From Millstream, Warlu Way presses west to the coast at the industrial powerhouse of Karratha and the Burrup Peninsula. The Burrup and the nearby islands of the Dampier Archipelago are home to possibly the world's biggest collection of ancient Aboriginal art. Thousands upon thousands of rock carvings, known as petroglyphs, adorn the rocks here, and stand in stark contrast to the modern-day industrial development.

No-one knows exactly when these pictures were carved. Most estimates range from 6,000 to 20,000 years ago. The images provide clues to the region's first inhabitants and also show a hazy record of natural history, with images like the Tasmanian tiger acting as proof that these now extinct creatures once roamed here.

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Main Junction Pool in Karijini National Park.

Photo – David Bettini

Insets Joffre Falls Lookout, snappy gum.
Photos – Cathy Zwick/DEC

Left Aboriginal rock carvings, Burrup Peninsula.

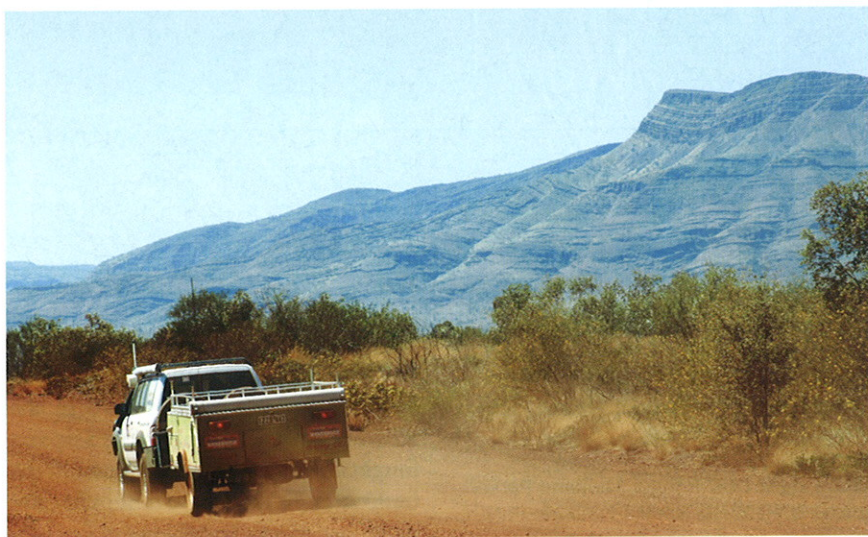
Photo – John Kleczkowski/Lochman Transparencies





Above background Mount Nameless, Tom Price.

Right Four-wheel driving past the Hamersley Ranges.
Photos – Michael Pelusey



The art belonged to the Yaburara, a northern group of the Ngarluma Aboriginal people. These people believe ancestral beings created the artworks as a record of their laws—laws that oblige Aboriginal people to care for this sacred land. Should these areas become damaged or be treated with disrespect, the ancestral beings could unleash spiritual powers to punish the perpetrators.

The proposed Dampier Archipelago Marine Park has the most biodiverse waters in Western Australia. The waters here are home to more than 215 species of coral, dugongs that graze upon swaying meadows of seagrasses, more than 40 species of shorebirds and migratory waders which inhabit the saltmarshes and mangroves, and populations of hawksbill, flatback and green turtles that nest on the shores (see 'Science in the sea', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2007).

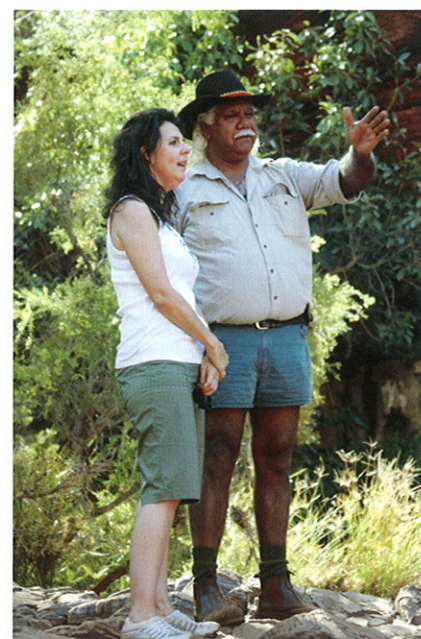
Troubled past

Next, Warlu Way journeys north-east, en route to Broome. First it travels through Roebourne, home to an Aboriginal community becoming increasingly renowned for its art. However, this community has experienced troubled times in the past. Warlu Way signage and the fascinating Roebourne Old Gaol Museum tell the story of the town's beginnings.

While Roebourne has a large Aboriginal population today, this area

wasn't traditionally an important place for the many Aboriginal groups who live here. It is the traditional country of the Ngarluma people but, through pastoral expansion, Aboriginal people of many different backgrounds were forced to settle here. These were dark days, a sad era when Aboriginal people were forced from the land that had nurtured their people for thousands of years.

With nowhere to go, the Aboriginal people lived in primitive conditions on



Top The historical town of Cossack.
Photo - Tourism WA

Above Karijini Eco Retreat.
Photo - Michael Pelusey

Above right DEC Ranger Maitland Parker guides a visitor in Karijini National Park.
Photo - Australia's North West Tourism

a reserve near Roebourne. People of the Ngarluma, Martuthumra, Yindjibarndi, Kurrama, Banyjima and more were expected to live side by side—akin to asking the British, French and Germans to live harmoniously together.

A mythological story tells of the struggle. Angered at the intrusion into the Ngarluma land, a great sea serpent conjured a mighty storm and flooded the landscape. The people from inland called on their freshwater serpent to

protect them from the sea serpent's fury. A ferocious battle ensued in the skies above Roebourne as the serpents fought for their people. Eventually the freshwater snake drove the saltwater snake out to sea, and the inland people were free to remain at Roebourne.

The Warlu Way signage at Cossack reveals more of the atrocities committed against Aboriginal people during early European settlement. In the earliest days of pearling, for which Cossack was an important port, Aboriginal people were rounded up in their camps, chained by the neck, and forced to march across the land. Many were marooned on islands, awaiting sale to passing pearling luggers. They were then forced to skin dive for pearl shells, many drowning and some dying from shark attacks in the process.

Of course Cossack today is a far cry from the days of yesteryear. Today the township is a virtually uninhabited historical village, complete with extensive information about the area's colourful past.

It is also the site of an annual art competition during which Aboriginal art is displayed.

Further north-east at Port Hedland, Warlu Way travellers can learn about one of the most controversial industrial relations disputes in Western Australian history—the Pilbara strike of 1946. This strike is widely regarded as transforming Aboriginal rights in an era when these people were treated as grossly inferior. However, others lament it as the end of an era for Aboriginal employment on their homelands.

Before the strike, Aboriginal people

Right Aboriginal art at Cossack.

Photo – Australia's North West Tourism

Below right Sandpipers and other waterbirds wading and feeding in shallow waters south of Broome.

Photo – Jiri Lochman



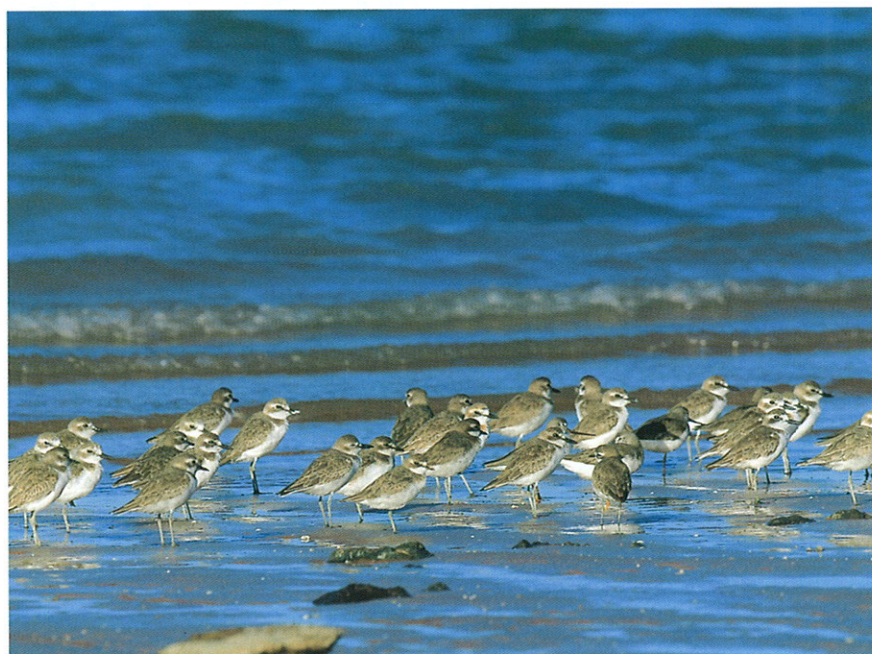
were widely employed on Pilbara stations in roles as drovers, station hands, gardeners and cleaners. Many believe the pastoral industry owes its early success to this labour. However, the Aboriginal employees were rarely paid with money. Instead they received payments in flour, tea, clothes and occasionally meat.

Many Aboriginal people became upset at this treatment occurring on what was traditionally their own land and decided enough was enough. Secret meetings were held and a plan was hatched. They chose 1 May 1946 as the date for action.

Two Aboriginal men walked and cycled hundreds of kilometres across the arid Pilbara countryside, whispering plans of the pending industrial action. As most Aboriginal people then couldn't read or write, they were given calendars, some hidden on the back of jam tins, to mark off the days until the strike.

That day finally came and about 800 Aboriginal people abandoned the stations, trudging many kilometres to Port Hedland. Here they converged in camps and survived from bush meat and from money earned through collecting pearl shells or extracting minerals from the earth. However, some Aboriginal people stayed on the stations, happy to have work on their homelands. Some even hid from the strike organisers to ensure they could remain.

Some strikers soon returned to the stations on the promise of better conditions. But most of the strikers remained in the Port Hedland camps. A few gradually saved their money, eventually using it to buy back land from station owners and return to their traditional country. Most, however, never returned to the stations. But they say what they lost in employment they earned in respect and pride.



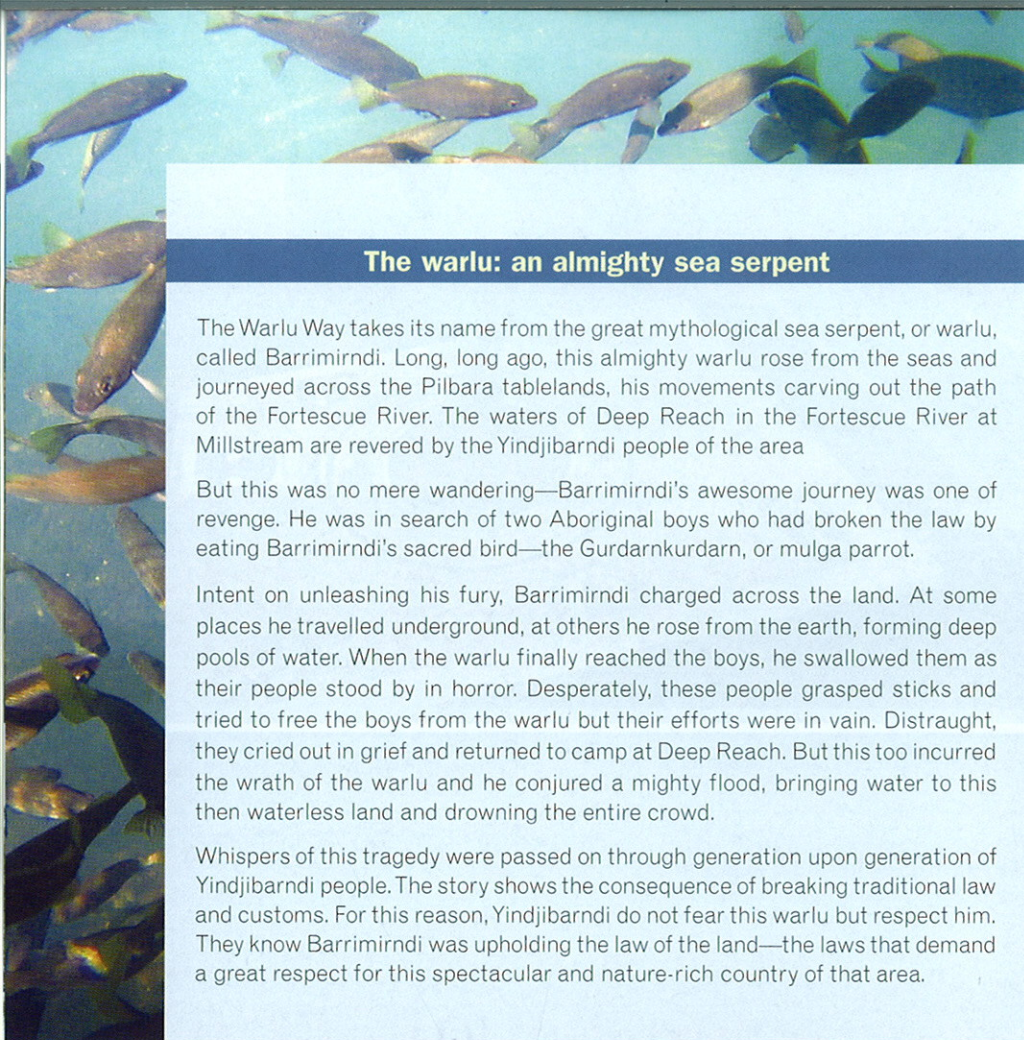
From here, there are options for a side journey to the north-east. Drivers can visit the historic town of Marble Bar—renowned as the hottest town in WA. Marble Bar was in fact misnamed after a jasper, not marble, outbreak which occurs by the Coongan River. It was founded on the hopes and dreams of gold discoveries in the late 1800s and retains its frontier feel today.

Top End

Warlu Way continues its journey north along nature-rich shores to Broome. It takes travellers to Eighty Mile Beach—the longest uninterrupted beach in WA. Its glistening shores stretch 220 kilometres between Cape Missiessy and Cape Keraudren (see 'Pilbara and Eight Mile Beach', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2008).

Each year millions of migratory birds journey from the northern hemisphere with their mysterious autopilots set on Eighty Mile Beach shores. Some of these birds have flown more than 10,000 kilometres, without stopping, to reach here by springtime. They are said to fly at several thousands metres high and average 70 kilometres an hour on their journey.

They come here for the summer to feast on a buffet of marine invertebrates that live in the mudflats—millions upon millions of crustaceans, molluscs and worms. The birds feed over the exposed sand and mudflats at low tide and congregate on the narrowing beach at high tide in immense flocks, their sheer numbers creating a breathtaking viewing spectacle.



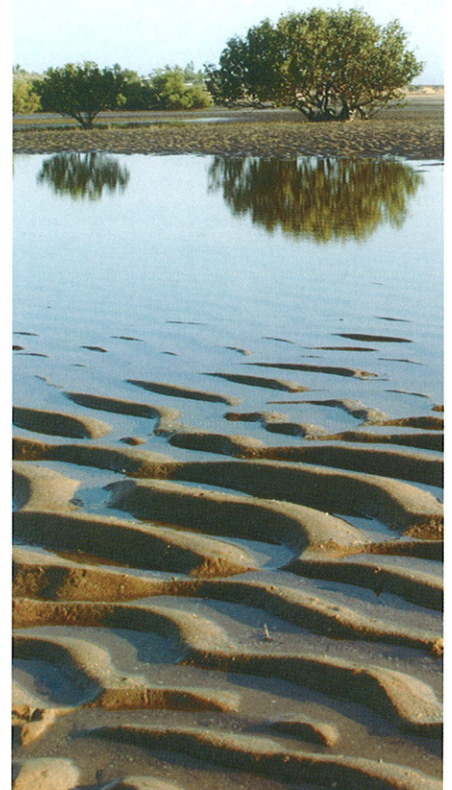
The warlu: an almighty sea serpent

The Warlu Way takes its name from the great mythological sea serpent, or warlu, called Barrimirndi. Long, long ago, this almighty warlu rose from the seas and journeyed across the Pilbara tablelands, his movements carving out the path of the Fortescue River. The waters of Deep Reach in the Fortescue River at Millstream are revered by the Yindjibarndi people of the area

But this was no mere wandering—Barrimirndi’s awesome journey was one of revenge. He was in search of two Aboriginal boys who had broken the law by eating Barrimirndi’s sacred bird—the Gurdarnkurdarn, or mulga parrot.

Intent on unleashing his fury, Barrimirndi charged across the land. At some places he travelled underground, at others he rose from the earth, forming deep pools of water. When the warlu finally reached the boys, he swallowed them as their people stood by in horror. Desperately, these people grasped sticks and tried to free the boys from the warlu but their efforts were in vain. Distraught, they cried out in grief and returned to camp at Deep Reach. But this too incurred the wrath of the warlu and he conjured a mighty flood, bringing water to this then waterless land and drowning the entire crowd.

Whispers of this tragedy were passed on through generation upon generation of Yindjibarndi people. The story shows the consequence of breaking traditional law and customs. For this reason, Yindjibarndi do not fear this warlu but respect him. They know Barrimirndi was upholding the law of the land—the laws that demand a great respect for this spectacular and nature-rich country of that area.



Above left background Fish in Fern Pool.
Photo – Cathy Zwick/DEC

Left Flatback turtle.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Top Tidal flats near Cossack.
Photo – Michael Pelusey

Above Fig in rock crevices at Karijini National Park.
Photo – Cathy Zwick/DEC

But it’s not only birds that visit this area. Between June and October, migrating humpback whales pass the coast on their mammoth journey from Antarctica to breeding grounds in waters off the north of the State. Dolphins are also regular visitors, as are flatback turtles, which come ashore between October and April to lay their eggs in the sand. These turtles hatch from about February to July and take to the oceans. Then, several decades later,

females that have survived return to the very stretch of beach on which they were born to give birth themselves.

Finally Warlu Way reaches its end destination in Broome. Here travellers can learn about how this favoured tourist destination has transformed from a riotous and rollicking outpost to a resort town renowned for its glorious beaches, pearls and meeting of diverse cultures.

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Warlu Way is an initiative of Australia’s North West Tourism, supported by DEC.

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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.



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