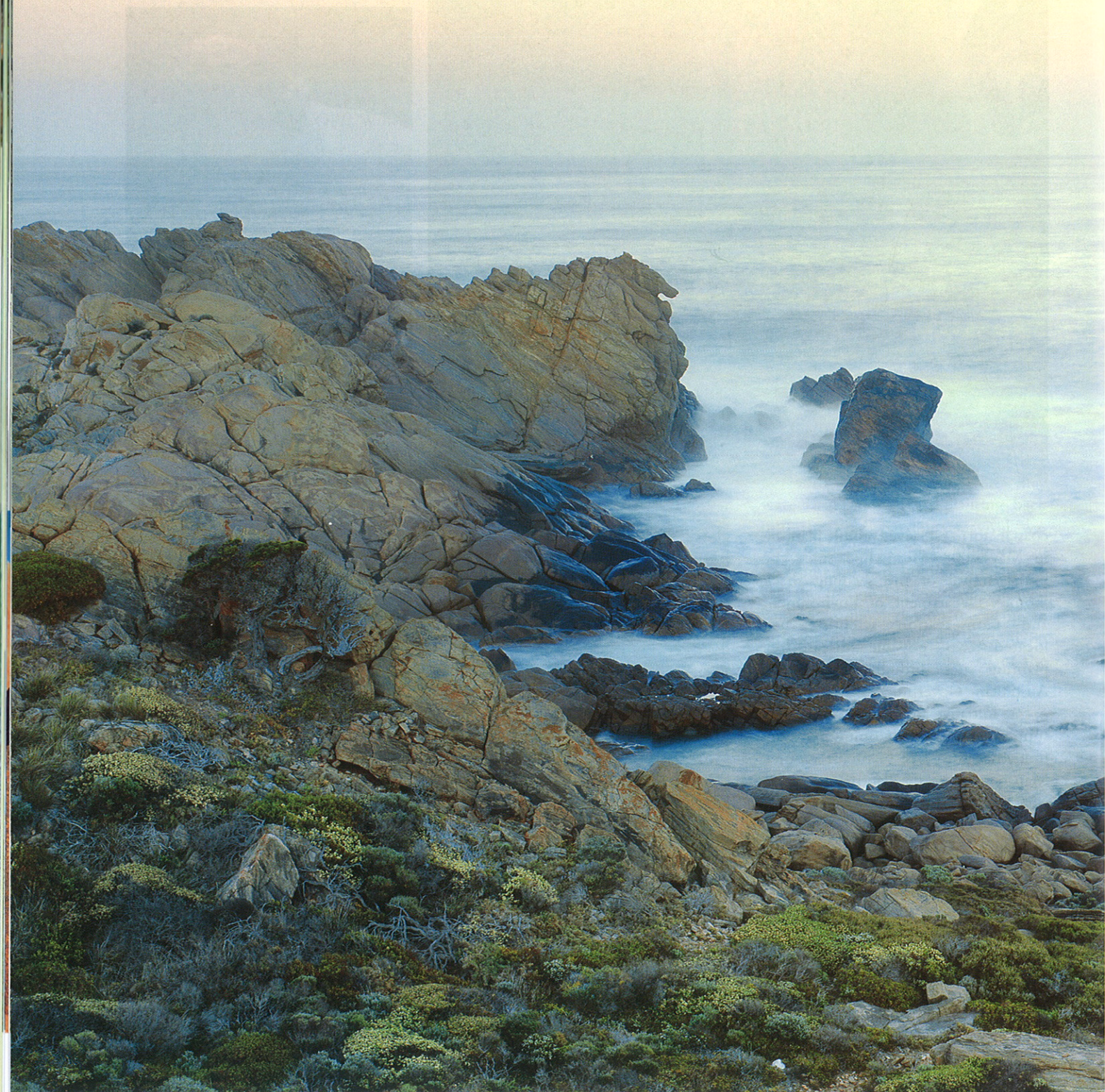


Managing our stunning  
*south-west corner*

by Joanna Moore



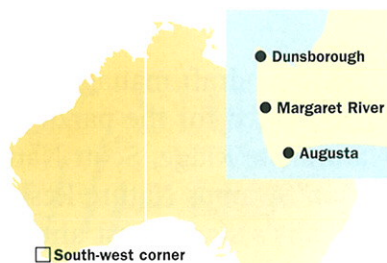
A new draft management plan soon to be released for the parks of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge, Scott National Park and Gingilup Swamps Nature Reserve in Western Australia's south-west aims to manage the demands faced by this ever-popular region.



The iconic tourist destination of Western Australia's south-west corner boasts exceptional coastal scenery, beautiful forests, extensive wetlands and a wealth of nature-based recreational opportunities. Visitors with walking boots, binoculars, fishing rods, four-wheel drives, caving gear and boats abound in summer, and on long weekends throngs of leisure-makers make the trip 'down south' to enjoy the beach and bush delights of the region. Others prefer to wine and dine at the dozens of local wineries, breweries, restaurants and cheese and chocolate factories which can be found between the towns of Augusta, Margaret River and Dunsborough.

In this nature-rich region, the lifestyles of locals are shaped by the natural environment. Many feel a close affiliation with nature and the striking visual landscapes around them. A strong beach and surfing culture exists, local galleries feature work inspired by the forests and the varied coastlines, and natural areas are adorned with trails where hikers walk at one with nature.

The region has the most diversified economy of any in the State, based strongly on agriculture, horticulture, emerging aquaculture industries and extensive mineral wealth. With



an estimated 2.1 million visits to Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park each year, tourism is also an important part of the economy. Viticulture has also experienced dramatic growth over the past decade.

### Biodiversity hotspot

These intensifying land uses are putting increasing pressure on the wide range of natural values found in the area's conservation reserves. The Leeuwin-Naturaliste coast and inland forested areas feature many flora, fauna and threatened ecological communities that are listed as threatened or priority species in need of protection. The area sits within the internationally recognised south-west region which is classed as one of the world's 34 biodiversity hotspots and one of Australia's top 15. 'Hotspots' are biologically significant ecosystems that support large numbers

of endemic species of plants and animals, and also face a high degree of threat to biodiversity.

High concentrations of endemic plant species are protected within Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park, a narrow strip of coastal land running about 100 kilometres from Cape Naturaliste near Dunsborough to Cape Leeuwin near Augusta, and on the Scott Coastal Plain, which stretches 36 kilometres to the east of Augusta. The area contains more than 1,600 described species of vascular plants in 118 families, the largest being the pea, orchid, daisy, grass, sedge and eucalypt families. The region is also significant for species at their range limits, as it marks the northern limits for many south coast plant species, including karri, and the southern limit for several species of the Swan Coastal Plain, such as the chenille honey myrtle (*Melaleuca huegeli*). Cape Naturaliste is the only place where jarrah forest meets the coast.

As well as containing large numbers of bio-geographically significant flora, the south-west corner is the site of cave ecosystems, nationally important wetlands and invaluable remnants of vegetation, such as bushland on the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge, an area which has been predominantly cleared due to the high demand for rural residential housing. There are also five threatened ecological communities in the south-west corner, including the Augusta microbial communities and Scott River ironstone community.

### Wetlands

Further south and east, Scott National Park is particularly well recognised for its diverse vegetation, high flora conservation values and high

Previous page

**Main** Sugarloaf Rock.

Photo – Damon Annison

**Inset** Wildflowers.

Photo – Ann Storrie

**Left** Surfing at Boodjidup on the Leeuwin-Naturaliste coast.

Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman  
Transparencies





**Above** Cape Leeuwin lighthouse, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park.  
Photo – David Bettini

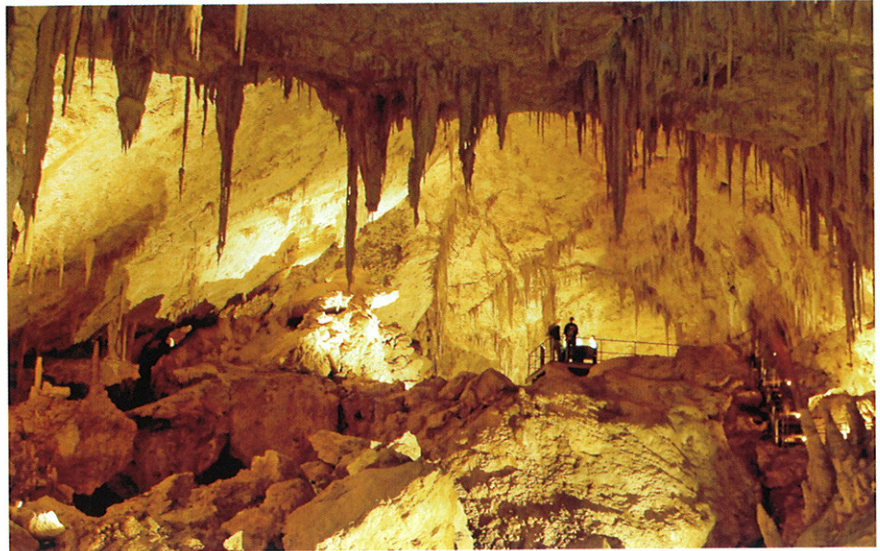
**Right** Calcite formations inside the large chambers of Mammoth Cave.  
Photo – Samille Mitchell/DEC

flora species richness. More than 800 species of plant have been recorded there. Together with Gingilup Swamps Nature Reserve, these reserves comprise the largest remaining remnants of vegetation on the western side of the Scott Coastal Plain, and both are rich in wetland area and type.

The wetlands of the south-west corner, including those on the Scott Coastal Plain, are important for the maintenance of ecological processes and linkages between ecological systems. One site—the tributaries of the lower Blackwood River—is considered a wetland system worthy of nomination for inclusion on the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance. The proposed nomination area provides critical habitat for the white-bellied frog (*Geocrinia alba*) and reedia swamps threatened ecological communities, both of which are critically endangered.

### Special frogs and other animals

The white-bellied frog is one of 11 species of frog recorded in the south-west corner of the State, all of which are endemic to the area. This little frog lives within an area north and



west of the Blackwood River between Margaret River and Augusta. In 1995, it occupied a range of just 190 hectares. Over the past 10 years this range has contracted further, mostly due to changing agricultural practices and the creation of large dams, leading to the disappearance of 25 per cent of known populations (see 'Fascinating frogs' on page 10).

Other species of specially protected and priority fauna found in the south-west corner include the forest red-tailed black-cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii naso*), chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroi*), western ring-tailed possum (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*), Dunsborough burrowing crayfish (*Engaewa reducta*) and Cape Leeuwin freshwater snail (*Austroassiminea lethia*).

### Caves

The Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge karst system is nationally and internationally significant and has several hundred karst features including caves, collapsed caves, solution pipes, root casts, subterranean drainage channels and some of the youngest but longest straw formations in the world. Caves are irreplaceable features of the landscape and support unique subterranean ecological communities of endemic aquatic invertebrate fauna.

Within the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge karst system, there are four critically endangered aquatic root mat communities, most of which are under extreme threat as a result of declining rainfall and falling water levels in the caves. The karst system



**Above** Quininup Falls, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park.  
*Photo – Alex Bond*

is also important for archaeology, palaeontology and recreation. Within the parks of the region, access to caves is strictly managed to minimise damage to these fragile systems.

### **Many uses**

As well as being of high conservation importance, the area also offers many recreational pursuits, valued highly by the local community and visitors. The parks of the south-west corner are the most visited recreation destinations outside of Perth, with visitation to the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park increasing by 75 per cent over the past decade. The region is also experiencing significant residential growth with a

focus on coastal areas. This popularity is putting increasing pressure on the natural spaces so treasured by both the local community and visitors who, ironically, often have little awareness of their high biodiversity values.

The parks of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge are fragmented and sit within a rapidly changing regional setting. Adjoining land uses such as viticulture, tree plantations and semi-rural developments shape the issues that land managers need to consider, such as fire, weeds, pest animals and visitor activities.

### **Improving management**

The nature conservation and recreation values of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste area have been managed according to the Leeuwin-Naturaliste

National Park Management Plan 1989–1999 for the past 18 years. A new draft management plan soon to be released will manage nearly 35,000 hectares of land including the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park along with the Yelverton, Bramley, Forest Grove and Scott national parks, the Gingilup Swamps Nature Reserve, several other small nature reserves, an unnamed national park and two timber reserves proposed to become forest conservation areas.

Many of these areas are now under increasing pressure and mis-use as tourist visitation increases and the residential population of the south-west continues to grow. The management plan will identify key actions required to protect and guide the use of these areas to ensure their value and function as conservation reserves continues into the future.

Adjoining the terrestrial parks is the proposed 'Capes' Marine Park. (See 'Capes coast beneath the surface', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 2007–08.) The stunning marine environment is a major drawcard to the region. While popular activities such as surfing and fishing are based on the water, getting to one's favourite surf break or fishing spot can impact on the land. Managing this impact will be one of the challenges of the plan. Once the marine park is gazetted, the values of the marine and terrestrial reserves will complement each other.

### **Experiences, settings and users**

Across its many settings, the area from Cape Naturaliste to Cape Leeuwin and inland provides a variety of experiences to a wide range of users. Bushwalking is a popular way to experience the bush and coastal scenery, especially for those seeking a remote nature-based experience. The Cape to Cape Track, which winds its way 135 kilometres down the Leeuwin-Naturaliste coastline, can be completed in five to seven days. Access points along its route provide a multitude of shorter walks for those with varying experience or time. A friends group has been formed to help develop and maintain the track and its collective assistance is an ongoing support to the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC).

A section at the northern end of the Cape to Cape Track is being improved to enable 'access for more'. Here a 1.5-metre-wide bitumen and boardwalk surface enables people in wheelchairs, people with walking sticks or frames and parents with children in prams to experience the coastal vegetation and stunning ocean views. Two-thirds of this part of the track have been completed—about 2.3 kilometres—and when it is finished it

will extend from the Cape Naturaliste lighthouse precinct to Sugarloaf Rock, where track users can be picked up by car.

These upgrades are part of improvements to create a high quality precinct at the Cape Naturaliste lighthouse that is accessible by as many people as possible—part of DEC's aim to accommodate visitors' wide-ranging needs when developing strategically selected high-use recreation areas. For

those who prefer a wilder nature-based experience, away from the major recreation areas, the rest of the Cape to Cape Track will retain its rougher terrain and sense of remoteness.

Another site being upgraded is Hamelin Bay, a popular camping and fishing location about 70 kilometres south of Cape Naturaliste. To help cope with increasing usage, the day-use area has a new car park, new toilets and improved walks trails to the beach, which has also benefited from rehabilitation work. The access road to the beach, which used to run through Hamelin Bay's caravan park, has been re-routed, for several reasons including the safety and amenity of caravan park users. Additionally Lake Davies near the caravan park is a significant site to Aboriginal people and is listed on the Western Australian Aboriginal Heritage Site Register.



**Left** An 'access for more' path, Cape to Cape Track.

*Photo – DEC*

**Below** Canoeists picnic on the tranquil lower reaches of the Blackwood River.

*Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies*



### How much development?

So will all the beautiful beaches, lookouts and historical sites eventually be developed to this degree? The new draft management plan determines that this will not be the case—rather the management of recreation areas will range from retaining places of minimal or no development to provide for remote experiences, through to highly modified areas that have been upgraded to cope with a higher-intensity use.

The vast numbers of visitors means that the really popular sites need to be able to handle mass tourism, especially during summer. Sites such as Canal Rocks, Ellensbrook Homestead, Redgate Beach, Sugarloaf Rock and Conto Camp Ground, which are well

known and easily accessible, offer a full range of facilities such as toilets, sealed roads and information panels.

However, many sites simply cannot cope with high visitation due to their fragile environments or if they are to retain their special character. Putting in picnic areas and boardwalks can change the feeling of a place and as the recreation values of a site shift with upgrades, sometimes the very reasons that people once came to visit are lost. Therefore, minor sites need only minimal facilities—those that guide visitors to avoid negative impacts on the environment.

Local community-based recreation activities such as fishing, surfing, bush-walking and nature appreciation are

long established and residents and special interest groups value being able to continue these activities in their favourite spots. Decisions about recreation development have also been influenced by the presence of sites with Aboriginal cultural significance, which are scattered along the coast.

By indicating that some sites will not be developed, the new draft management plan aims to ensure that the diversity of experiences which have been enjoyed by people visiting and living in the south-west will continue.

### Indigenous cultural heritage

The Leeuwin-Naturaliste region was the tribal territory of the Wardandi people, essentially a coastal people based between Bunbury and Cape Leeuwin, and the Pibbelmen people, who lived around the lower Blackwood River. Sites of Aboriginal cultural significance in the planning area for the new draft management plan include middens and hearths, burial and ceremonial sites, mythological sites, paintings and engravings and artefact sites.

Artefacts are a valuable record of past Aboriginal life in the area and one significant location where many of these have been found is Devil's Lair. This cave site on the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge contains animal remains and stone and bone artefacts which show the first human occupation in the area to be as early as 50,000 years ago, making it one of the oldest and most reliably dated early occupation sites in Australia. The management of Devil's Lair and other Aboriginal cultural heritage in the area will be guided by principles including their need for protection and the recognition that Aboriginal people are the primary source of information on the value and conservation of their heritage.

### Telling the stories

An important aspect of improving and managing for recreational use is interpretation—information which reveals the natural and cultural values of a place to visitors. Interpretation enhances appreciation of park values,

**Left** Gannet Rock, Meelup.  
*Photo – Ann Storrie*



leading to an increased understanding and support for their management. The diverse stories of the area—such as the dynamic coastline environment, the extensive wetlands of Scott National Park and Gingilup Swamps Nature Reserve, Aboriginal and historic sites, the stunning karri forest and its changing land uses and the merging of the Southern and Indian oceans at rugged Cape Leeuwin—shape the themed interpretation provided for visitors throughout the area.

While the name Caves Road hints at one story of the region, it may not be widely known that the primary reason for the original creation of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park was its complex system of caves and other karst features. Cave overhangs were used as shelters by the Aboriginal people before intensive exploration began with colonial settlement from about 1850. From the turn of the 20th century, tourists travelled three hours by horse and carriage from the railhead at Busselton down the then Lake Cave Road to visit the caves that were at that stage the most significant tourist attractions in the area. Amateur explorers and, later, tour groups with little awareness of fragile cave formations caused significant damage to the caves.

The two tourist caves managed by DEC, Calgardup and Giants, and others such as Jewel, Mammoth, Ngilgi and Lake which are managed by local tourism associations, continue to be visited today. During the 18-year life of the previous management plan for the area, huge achievements were made in cave management. From access to caves occurring on an essentially random basis before 1989, the caves of the area are now some of the best-managed in Australia. The new draft management plan for the area will endorse the current permit system for the DEC-managed caves, which classifies caves as tourist (publicly accessible), adventure (appropriate for public access with an approved trip leader) or restricted access (only accessible for approved research).

### Continuing inspiration

Hundreds of thousands of visitors spend time in the south-west corner each year, drawn by world-class recreational opportunities and exceptional scenery. Such a diverse and treasured area deserves the care of all who use it—whether for recreation, lifestyle or livelihood. With careful management and an increased awareness by visitors and the local community of the conservation values

that surround them, the area can continue to support a wide range of sustainable nature-based recreation activities in its inspiring coast, forest, heathland and cave settings.

**Above** Cosy Corner Beach in the Augusta region of Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park.

*Photo – Alex Bond*

**Below** An 'access for more' path, Cape to Cape Track.

*Photo – DEC*



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- 42 Hidden biodiversity: fungi and invertebrates  
Biological surveying on the south coast reveals a remarkable array of weird and wonderful fungi and invertebrate species.
- 50 Discovering the coral life in Shark Bay Marine Park  
Monitoring of Shark Bay corals highlights the diversity of coral species in this nature-rich place.
- 56 Bound by a love for flora  
A committed group of flora enthusiasts has been monitoring south-west flora for 20 years.

## Regulars

- 9 Endangered  
Dibbler
- 40 Feature park  
Purnululu National Park
- 49 Bookmarks  
*The Big Picture Book of Environments*  
*Life on the Rocks*  
*Native Mice and Rats*
- 62 Urban antics  
Dead wood

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32



42



10