



Stokes National Park

Visitor infrastructure at Stokes National Park is being reopened thanks to new works to repair flood and fire damage in this coastal area near Esperance.

Above Historical Moir Homestead, viewed from the blacksmith's workshop.
Photo - Marie Lochman

Opposite page
Far right Lookout at Shoal Cape.
Photo - Klaus Tiedemann/DEC

The deep valleys and dunes of the 10,667-hectare Stokes National Park cradle the waters of the 14-square kilometre Stokes Inlet. The Young and Lort rivers flow into the upper reaches of the inlet but, when the water level is low in summer, they are cut off from the lagoon by a wide river delta. A sand bar blocks the estuary from the ocean, except when flooding occurs.

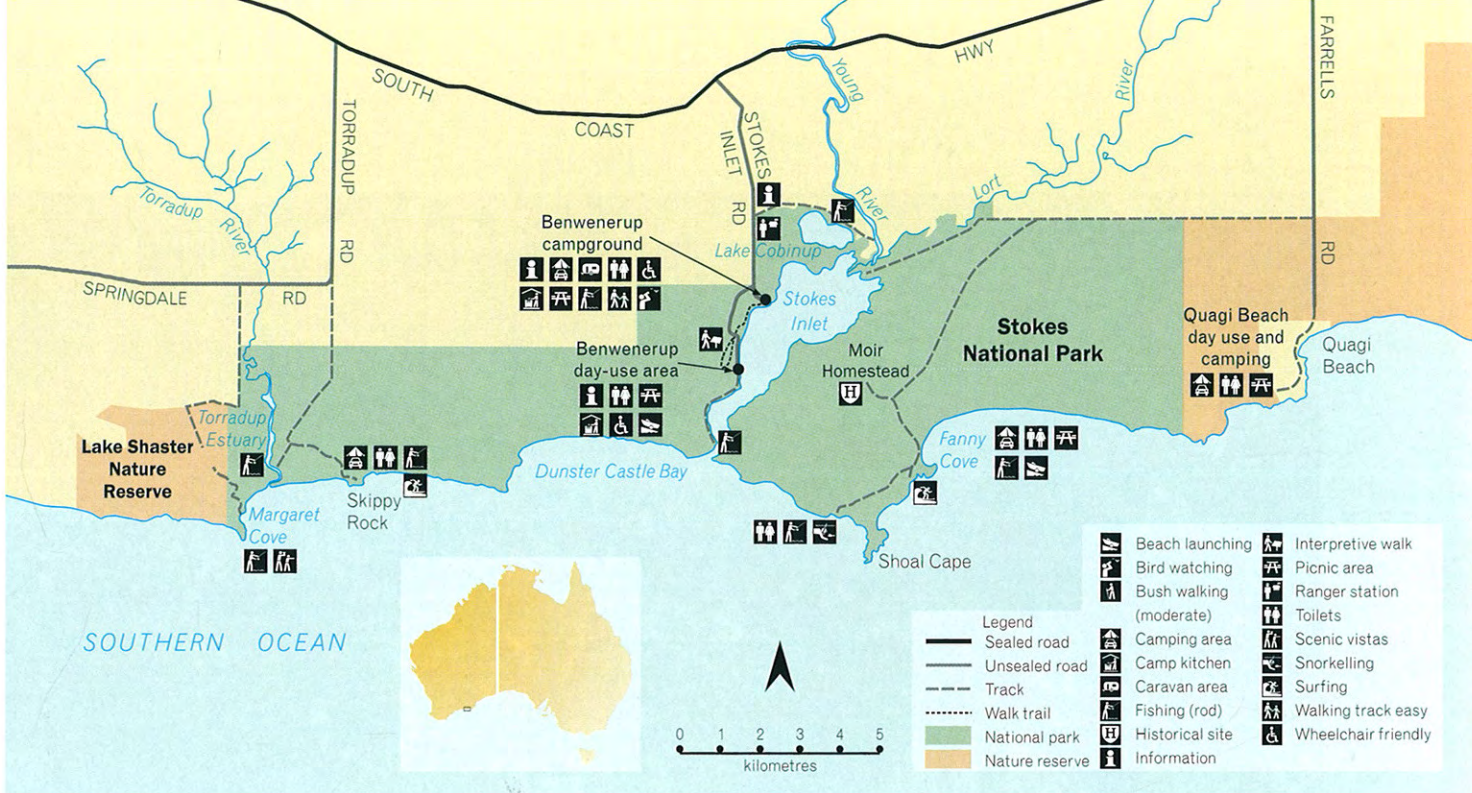
Wildfire swept through the park in November 2006, destroying much of the visitor infrastructure, and flood ravaged the coast in 2007, ruining the main access road to the Benwenerup campground on the western side of Stokes Inlet. However, works in the area have now resulted in the road being reconstructed and the creation of new, modern camping and day-use facilities as well as the reopening of the Stokes Heritage Trail. The fire has also sparked a burst of new life with fresh vegetation now cloaking the once-blackened landscape in new growth.

History

The area around Stokes Inlet was highly important to Aboriginal people who described the area from the Young and Lort rivers to the west and Thomas River to the east as 'one country'. About four family groups traditionally lived in the region and evidence of their occupation remains in features like an ochre quarry, possible burial sites and the mythological site Walitch Benwenerup, which means 'place where the eagle came to scratch (the cliff) and die'.

European presence in the area started in 1848 when John Septimus Roe led an expedition to explore country between Cape Riche and Russell Range to the east of Esperance Bay. During this trip, he named Stokes Inlet and Lort and Young rivers. Pastoral interest began in 1863 when the Dempster family selected and received land at Stokes Inlet for a 5,700-hectare pastoral lease around the inlet.

In 1873, the lease was transferred to John and Alexander Moir who



built Moir Homestead east of the inlet using bush timber and limestone quarried from nearby hills. The ruins of the homestead, blacksmith workshop, shepherds' camp, woodshed and stables remain today.

The Moir family passed responsibility for the land down through the generations until 1951 when the White family took on the lease. The family farmed here until 1970, when mining interests threatened to begin work in the area, and they surrendered the lease to the State Government on the condition it became a national park, which occurred in 1974.

Natural attractions

The mud flats, shallows and riverine delta at Stokes Inlet provide important habitat for waterbirds with at least 29 species occurring here, including large numbers of Australian shelduck, grey teals, little black cormorants, black swans and chestnut teals.

Migratory species also visit here each year, including the common sandpiper and red-capped plover. Australasian grebes, Australian pelicans, little pied cormorants, white-faced herons, great egrets and pied oystercatchers also visit the inlet—about 50 species use the inlet in total and 170 species have been recorded in the wider area.

The inlet is fringed by paperbarks, sedges and samphires while the waters are home to seagrasses and small green algae. When the sandbar breaks to the ocean, marine species like prawns (*Penaeus*

latisulcatus), mussels (*Mytilus edulis*), blue manner crabs (*Portunus pelagicus*) and small jellyfish enter the lagoon.

Exploring the park

Benwenerup campground and day-use area at Stokes Inlet is the most popular area in the park, accessible by two-wheel-drive vehicle. You can set out on one of three walk trails from here. The easiest option is the 1.5-kilometre Stokes Heritage Trail, which is also suitable for bike and assisted wheelchair access. You can continue on from here on a moderately difficult section of the trail, which extends 2.5 kilometres from the original trail in a climb to a limestone ridge with some views over the inlet. The third option is the easy 3.5-kilometre walk from Benwenerup day-use area to the mouth of Stokes Inlet, which passes through a forest of fringing paperbarks but is only accessible when the estuary water levels are low.

Boaters can launch their boats from the day-use area and fishermen can cast a line here for black bream and King George whiting and drop nets for blue manna crabs, either from a boat or the banks of Stokes Inlet or Young River. Be sure to check Department of Fisheries licence requirements before fishing.

Further afield, Fanny Cove, Skippy Rock and Shoal Cape are among several other sites accessible by four-wheel drive. They provide striking coastal scenery and popular fishing spots. You can see the ruins of the Moir Homestead on the way to Fanny Cove.

Camping

Benwenerup campground features 14 campsites, including space for group camping, individual camping and caravans and campervans. Campers can use camp kitchen facilities which include free gas barbecues, while toilets and picnic tables are also provided. Campers need to register at a self registration station and camping fees apply.



park facts

- Where is it?** Stokes National Park is about 80 kilometres west of Esperance.
- Total area:** 10,667 hectares.
- What to see and do:** Walking, fishing, picnic, boating, bird watching, surfing.
- Facilities:** Campground, camp kitchen, toilets, picnic tables and boat ramp.
- Nearest DEC office:** 92 Dempster Street, Esperance, phone (08) 9083 2100.

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