



# Parks for all

by Karla Forrest

As Samantha Jenkinson and her husband Michael reach the highest platform of the Tree Top Walk—40 metres above the ground—Samantha is struck by the sheer beauty of her surroundings. She remarks that there is a wonderful feeling of space up among the treetops. Samantha's comments echo those of almost everyone who visits the Tree Top Walk in Walpole-Nornalup National Park, yet Samantha is particularly appreciative of the experience. Samantha uses a wheelchair, but she is able to enjoy the attraction in the same way others do.

## Planning for accessibility

Ensuring that people with disability have the same opportunity as others to experience the forest canopy was a key consideration in the planning of the Tree Top Walk. Samantha, who is the chairperson of the Ministerial

Advisory Council on Disability, says that often people with disability feel enclosed and limited in what they can do and where they can live. It is therefore important that they are able to get out into nature and enjoy outdoor activities. The Disability Services Commission recognises that being close to nature brings joy to people of all ages and abilities. However, the commission notes that achieving access for all presents numerous challenges as there are many aspects that need to be considered in creating an inclusive and welcoming visitor experience.

Accessibility is not only about providing for those with physical disability, but is also about ensuring people with cognitive and sensory disability are accommodated. According to Samantha, one of the key ways of doing this is to provide clear and easy ways of navigating.

The Department of Environment and Conservation's (DEC's) planning for accessibility is a complex process, with the department also having a responsibility to preserve and protect the environment. Striking a balance between accessibility and conservation requires careful consideration. DEC has been improving access to parks around the state for about 30 years, with the Tree Top Walk a prime example of a very accessible natural attraction. Yet while redevelopment provides an opportunity to improve facilities, visitors can already find many existing accessible sites around Western Australia.

## Everyone can experience the Pinnacles

The strange and striking landscape of the Pinnacles in Nambung National Park—which features thousands of huge limestone pillars rising from the



We love our natural areas, but sometimes they are not the most accessible places. The Department of Environment and Conservation has been working towards improving access to national, regional and conservation parks for people with disability.

sands—is now one of the state’s most accessible attractions for people with disability. A major redevelopment of the visitor centre and surrounding infrastructure in 2008 greatly improved access (see ‘Discovering the Pinnacles’, *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2010). There is wheelchair access to the Pinnacles Desert Discovery Centre, public toilets and parking area, as well as a short ramped path leading to a lookout. From there, wheelchair access to the Pinnacles is assisted rather than independent, but people have the option of driving through the Pinnacles along a vehicle track. The new toilet facilities also have Braille signage. DEC staff are currently exploring other options to make the Pinnacles an even more accessible experience, with podcasts being considered to assist people who are blind or have a vision impairment to appreciate the interpretive material in the discovery centre.

### Karijini National Park

Many people are able to enjoy the beautiful rugged scenery of Karijini National Park, the state’s second largest national park. Two popular park locations, Fortescue Falls and Hamersley Gorge, will soon be more accessible. The Karijini National Park Visitor Centre is highly accessible; not only does it cater for wheelchairs, but it also features various interpretive displays that people can read, listen to or touch—such as a model of an olive python and an emu nest full of eggs. Some of the trails around the rims of the park’s famous gorges are suitable for assisted wheelchair use or for people with limited mobility. From the Weano Recreational Area, people with limited mobility may join walkers along a 400-metre compacted gravel trail from the main parking area around the gorge rim to Junction Pool



**Main** The Pinnacles at sunset in Nambung National Park. The park is one of the state’s most accessible for people with disability.

*Photo – Len Stewart/Lochman  
Transparencies*

**Above** Samantha Jenkinson experiencing the Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk.

*Photo – Michael Geddes*



**Above** The 1.5-kilometre Lake Thetis Loop Trail in Nambung National Park provides access for people with disability along an initial 300 metres of boardwalk, which passes the best examples of stromatolites in the lake.

Lookout. Some may require assistance along the path. There is also a road that runs parallel to the trail which can be used to drop someone off next to the lookout, or to pick someone up if they tire. Either way, breathtaking views of Hancock Gorge await those who venture to the lookout.

### More accessible parks

Accessibility is a key consideration when planning and designing access for people in parks. Hangover Bay in Nambung National Park is being upgraded to include more accessible steps to the beach, as well as wheelchair-accessible paths, benches

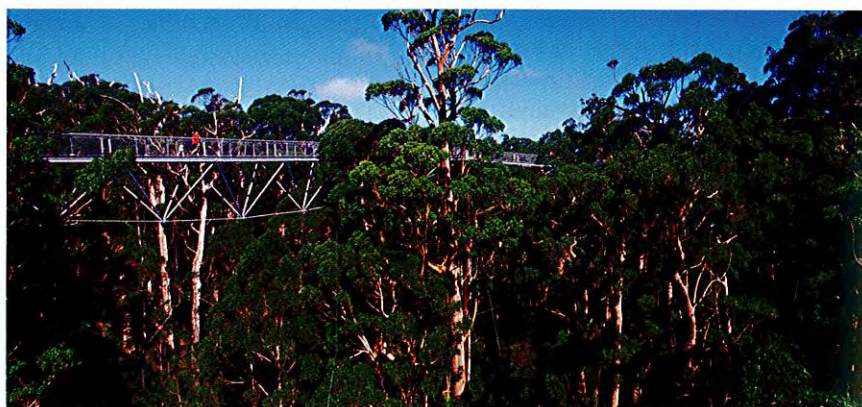
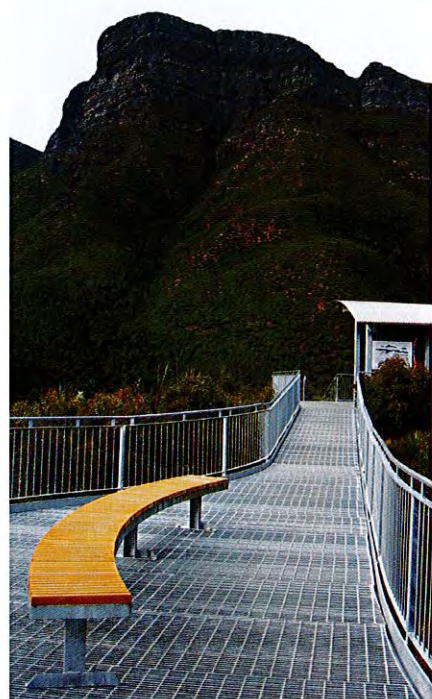
and tables. Heading into summer, many beaches around the state are providing beach wheelchairs or beach matting, so more people can enjoy the superb coastline our state is famous for. Lake Thetis, near Cervantes, has an excellent boardwalk from which everyone can view the stromatolites close-up, as well as a new walk trail that provides easier access around the lake.

Whether it is a matter of providing podcasts, Braille signage or wheelchair access, everyone should have access to WA's natural places. For the one in five people in WA who has a disability, these are important steps that ensure everyone has the option to

**Below left** Accessible walkways near Bluff Knoll in Stirling Range National Park. Photos – DEC

**Below** The Tree Top Walk in Walpole-Nornalup National Park. Photo – Jiri Lochman

experience the splendour and diversity of the natural environment. And, in return, nature will benefit from an increased environmental awareness and appreciation in the community.



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*For more information on accessibility to parks, visit the You're Welcome WA website at [www.accesswa.com.au](http://www.accesswa.com.au).*

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