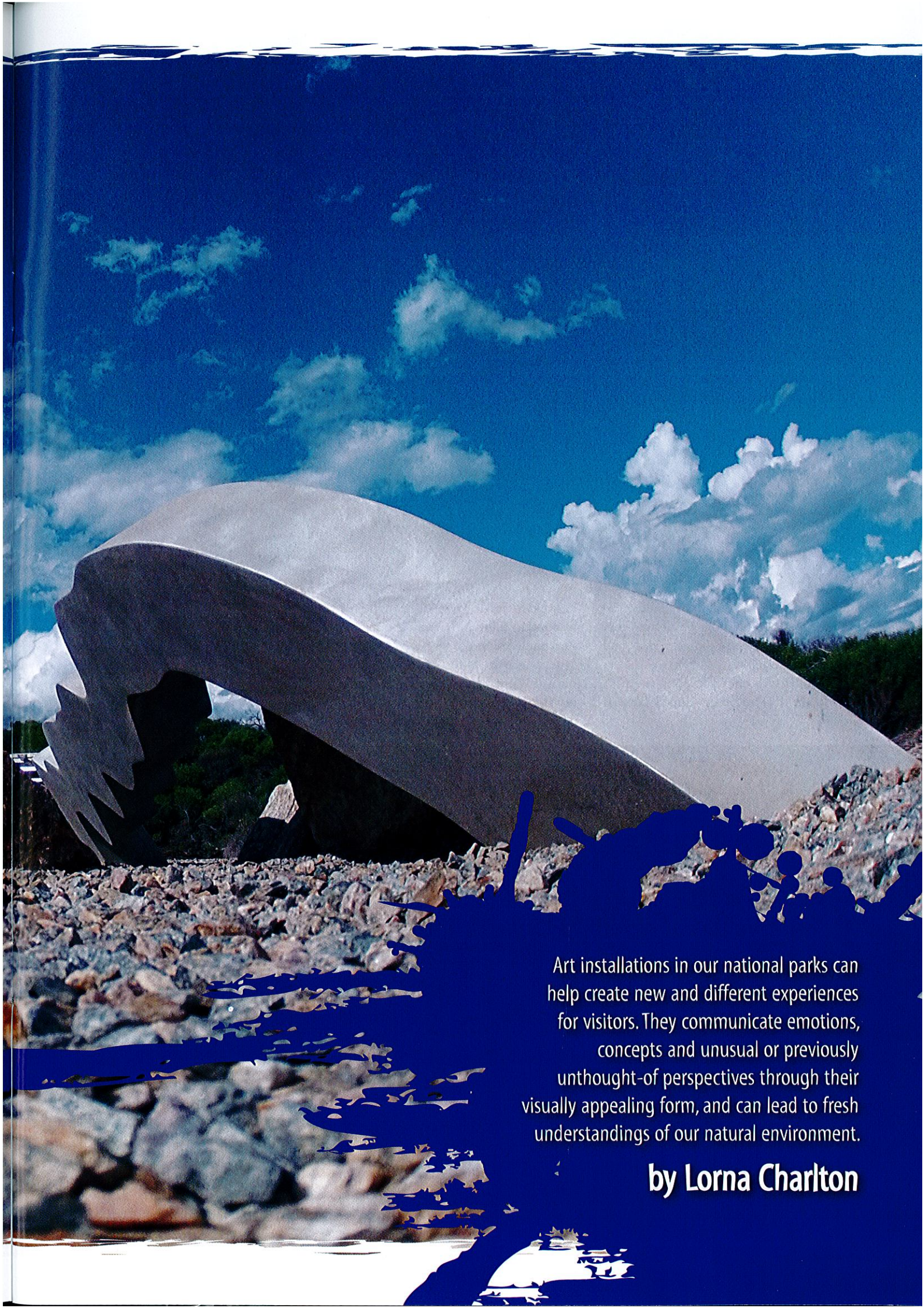




# Art in the park





Art installations in our national parks can help create new and different experiences for visitors. They communicate emotions, concepts and unusual or previously unthought-of perspectives through their visually appealing form, and can lead to fresh understandings of our natural environment.

**by Lorna Charlton**



**N**estled in a secluded swale between rolling sand dunes and a rocky wave-washed headland on Western Australia's remote south coast, sculpted metal forms crafted by human hand reflect the changing colours and moods of the sky. These pieces, by sculptor Tony Pankiw, comprise a new art installation at Barrens Beach in Fitzgerald River National Park.

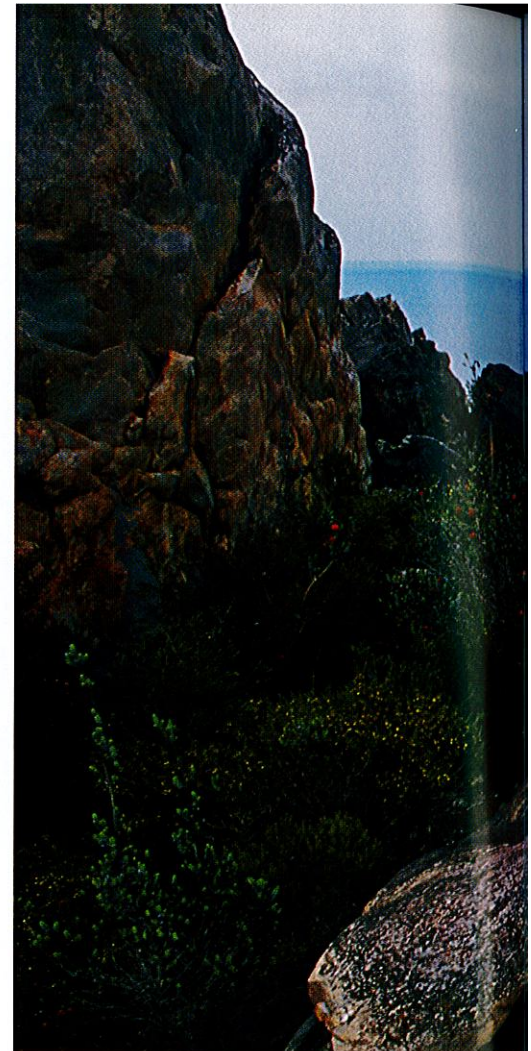
The polished pieces have been creatively combined with large fragments of quartzite rock left over from nearby roadworks to help tell the park's geological story. Each piece in the sculpture represents a different peak in the Barrens Range, which runs east to west across the park. The edge of the path next to the sculpture has been moulded into the shape of the Fitzgerald coastline and shows details of local bays and inlets. Together the sculpture and moulded coastline re-create the national park in microcosm. They become props for guided talks and an interactive experience for visitors of all ages that is designed to communicate ideas and provoke thought.

When visitors walk along the path into the recently redeveloped Barrens

Beach site to enjoy the new facilities they are invariably surprised at seeing art in the national park. Reactions are varied. Some visitors are instantly delighted while others are puzzled by an installation that strays from the usual modes of communicating park values, such as interpretive panels and visitor centre exhibits. Isn't art meant for art galleries, cultural centres or urban parks?

### **Creating pleasure and meaning**

The beauty of art in the national park is that it adds another dimension to the visitor experience. It aims to create an enjoyable and unique experience through a visually appealing medium. It also attempts to communicate ideas and feelings. Nevertheless, the way that we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe, and so art is always open to interpretation. Regardless of how it is perceived, the intent of art in the national park is to encourage visitors to look more deeply and be inspired to think differently about their surroundings. In the words of Aristotle, "the aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance".



The role of Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) interpretation officers is to interpret a park's natural and cultural values, predominantly through words and images in printed media. With these tools, they set out to share knowledge and ideas from many sources. Using storytelling, quotes and poetry, they draw upon many different voices from the past and present. Art installations are an expression of the artist's experiences and feelings, adding yet another voice and perspective to the mix that has the chance to connect deeply with some visitors.

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The art installation at Fitzgerald River National Park conveys the tilted geology of the Barrens Range.

*Photo - Doug Simpson/DEC*

**Left** Art is the focal point at Barrens Beach interpretive hub.

*Photo - DEC*







## The great outdoors

Visual art stimulates the imagination and provokes emotions. Depending on the individual artwork, its sheer size can have tremendous visual and emotional impact. Forms and materials are varied, and the potential for art exhibits to interact with the natural environment is exciting. The installations can capture a breeze and create delightful sound, cast beautiful images in shadows that shift and change shape, or direct the flow of rainfall into dynamic waterspouts.

Unlike art that is displayed in a controlled indoor environment, an outdoor exhibit is constantly changing in response to its surroundings—the intensity and colour of the light falling upon it, shifting moods in the weather, and seasonal transitions in the backdrop. The same piece can therefore evoke a variety of responses and emotions on different occasions.

Helen Heydenrych, a project officer with DEC Albany, described how the sculpture at Barrens Beach took on different meanings with each visit she made during the site's upgrade. On one occasion it was evocative of the park's rugged quartzite peaks, on another it echoed the soft clouds that

were reflected in its surface and then it changed yet again and recalled bleached driftwood washed up on the shore.

## Planned not plonked

Not all art is created to fulfil a specific external purpose. In general, artists will create art for the pure joy of it, as a means of expressing themselves or exploring the world. With a specific purpose, however, art installations appearing in DEC-managed parks require thoughtful planning and execution.

Before engaging an artist, the DEC heritage interpreter will research and analyse a site in terms of its intrinsic values, tangible attributes, likely audience and potential stories. This analysis is at the heart of interpretive planning and forms the basis for an integrated suite of communication methods and products that are designed to convey some simple and clear themes or messages. The objectives and themes developed for a park or a recreation site guide the creation of any proposed interpretation, including art installations.

For example, when state and federal government funding was

**Above** Fitzgerald River National Park's ruggedly beautiful coastline.

*Photo – Jiri Lochman*

received to upgrade recreation sites and facilities across Fitzgerald River National Park, interpretive planning identified Barrens Beach as a key site where the 'big picture stories' could be introduced and told. The park is renowned for its floral biodiversity and scenic grandeur. Much of the drama of this park is created by the Barrens Range, a point reinforced by Penelope Figgis from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature World Commission on Protected Areas who said: "The view across an ancient upland plateau and wide coastal plain, with its coloured spongolite cliffs, to the distant Barrens is one of the great wilderness views of Australia."

Underlying the park's biodiversity and magnificent scenery is a complex and intriguing geology, which became a key theme in the park's interpretation.





**Left** Water-cut aluminium designs turn interpretive structures into art in Fitzgerald River National Park.  
 Photo – Helen Heydenrych/DEC

**Below** The ‘Wherever the wind blew him’ totem at Dryandra Woodland.  
 Photo – Lorna Charlton/DEC



These stories and others about the park’s natural and cultural values are expressed in a number of ways in addition to the commissioned art exhibit. Other media include the use of words and images on interpretive panels at Barrens Beach, and additional artistic elements that have been incorporated into the structures that support them. Large maps of natural and cultural features associated with the park’s coastline stretch across the panels and complement the park map embedded in the path nearby. Examples of the park’s iconic plants and animals—which have been cut in a stencil-like fashion into metal beneath the panels—work in harmony with the aluminium that has been used in other structures at the site, including the art exhibit. These stencils cast delightful shadows on the paths leading to the interpretive site.

**Ticking the boxes**

Planning the interpretation and artwork is just the start of a lengthy process. Expressions of interest are then sought from the art community and potential artists are provided with a detailed brief that explains the context and intent of the artwork. The brief contains background information and visual references to help artists prepare concepts. A site visit is a must for the artist who is eventually selected for the project.

Artists contemplating an ‘art in the national park’ project are faced with an interesting challenge. They must develop a concept that is not only personally inspiring, but is also aesthetically pleasing and responds to the brief. The art is required to interpret park values while considering durability and maintenance in an



**Right** The art installation 'Ghost Feather' at Swarbrick evokes associations of the ephemeral nature of all things.  
Photo – Gil Field/DEC

outdoor setting, as well as visitor safety. The three-dimensional forms and materials used in the creation of Tony Pankiw's sculpture at Barrens Beach tick all the right boxes, and create the opportunity for visitors to explore and contemplate the geological processes that have created a distinctive and inspiring landscape.

### Tribute to an Australian icon

Another successful art exhibit was created in Dryandra Woodland to acknowledge the achievements of environmental educator, author and naturalist Dr Vincent Serventy OAM (1916–2007). Serventy dedicated 60 years to environmental work in Australia and overseas, and was awarded a Dutch knighthood by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands for his services to international conservation (see 'Vincent Serventy: the story of an Australian icon', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 2009).

Serventy was born in Armadale, WA. From his earliest years he, in his own words, "soaked up the rapture of the bush" and Dryandra Woodland became one of his favourite haunts. This large remnant of native bushland, located two hours' drive south of Perth in the Wheatbelt, offered Serventy a great outdoor laboratory to study the region's plant and animal life. His book *Dryandra—The Story of an Australian Forest* played a critical role in conserving this bushland for future generations.

Artist Matt Dickmann responded to the woodland setting by creating a totem crafted from a wandoo tree that had been felled by a severe storm at Dryandra. Mounted high on the totem, sculpted steel pieces depict a dryandra flower, numbat and



Carnaby's cockatoo—a mix of iconic and endangered species associated with Dryandra.

On the very top of the totem, a wind vane that spins gently in the wind has been moulded into the shape of a figure that represents Serventy and his extensive travels around the world as an advocate for conservation. The sculpture, appropriately named 'Wherever the wind blew him', was designed to convey the inspiration that Serventy instilled in others through his passion and life-long dedication to conservation and environmental education. Small dryandra leaves recreated in steel on a separate structure nearby act as a visual connection between the totem and interpretive panels that tell the traveller's story.

### Where the wild things are

Swarbrick is another forest setting with strong links to the conservation movement, where art exhibits have been used to enrich the visitor experience and create a place for insight and contemplation.

Swarbrick is old-growth karri forest now protected within the Walpole Wilderness of more than 300,000 hectares in the south-west of WA. Swarbrick Forest was a prominent site for the forest campaigners that saw the culmination of their efforts in the declaration of the Walpole Wilderness in 2001. Today installations at the Walpole Wilderness discovery site celebrate the changing perceptions of forests and wilderness over time.





**Above** The 'Torus' at Swarbrick symbolises the inter-connectedness of all living things.

A 500-metre-return walk through the forest takes you past the 'Door of Perception' and through the 'Wilderness Wall of Perceptions' before encountering the art exhibits that present perceptions of a different nature. Swarbrick provides visitors with "spaces for introspective contemplation of the forest and wilderness". Those spaces are loaded with thought-provoking words and exhibits designed to reinforce, review or even change the visitor's perception of the forest and wilderness, and the associated events here and elsewhere over the past 100 years.

Among the exhibits at Swarbrick is a sculpture by Nyoongar artist Peter Farmer, who explained: "Through my art practice I am able to explore and share ideas of Nyoongar culture while also finding things about myself, my country and my people. My sculpture is in the middle of two message sticks having the look of karri trees. The most significant symbol is Norne—the

black snake, which is visually thick and seemingly foreboding. I hope it evokes thought ... that Swarbrick is still a wilderness area and that wild things roam."

### A place in our parks

Like the art exhibits described here, perhaps this article has provoked thought and stimulated curiosity. Visual and dimensional art has an important place in our parks. It can convey what words alone cannot and can also bring out that which cannot be seen or felt easily. Art can open our hearts and minds to new perceptions and emotional connections.

When you encounter art in the park, linger, look deeply and consider the words of American painter of nature, Annie Bevanz: "Art is our memory of love. The most an artist can do through their work is say, let me show you what I have seen, what I have loved, and perhaps you will see it and love it too."

**Below** This sculpture by Nyoongar artist Peter Farmer is one of several at Swarbrick. Photos – Gil Field/DEC



Lorna Charlton is a Department of Environment and Conservation senior interpretation officer and can be contacted on (08) 9334 0581 or by email ([lorna.charlton@dec.wa.gov.au](mailto:lorna.charlton@dec.wa.gov.au)).



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