

Lucky escapes in Torndirrup National Park

A personal account of the sometimes treacherous southern coastline.

by Roger Underwood



On a recent exploration of well-loved spots along the coast east and west of Albany, my wife Ellen and I were reminded of two escapades in Torndirrup National Park many years ago. Both resulted in near disaster. Revisiting the scenes reminded us that this coast is not just one of the most beautiful in the world, but also one of the most treacherous.

The first incident occurred in 1964 when Ellen was a young school teacher and I was a young forestry officer, both living in Pemberton. We were courting at the time, and on weekends would set out on explorations of the karri forest and the little-known inlets, cliffs and beaches along the south coast. Our invariable companion was Cassius, my blue heeler cattle dog. Cassius had initially been a one-man dog and for a while he was suspicious of Ellen entering my life, but she had won him over, and the three of us had enjoyed many lovely times bushwalking and beachcombing.

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Top The Gap in Torndirrup National Park.
Bottom Huge swell crashing on the coast in the park.

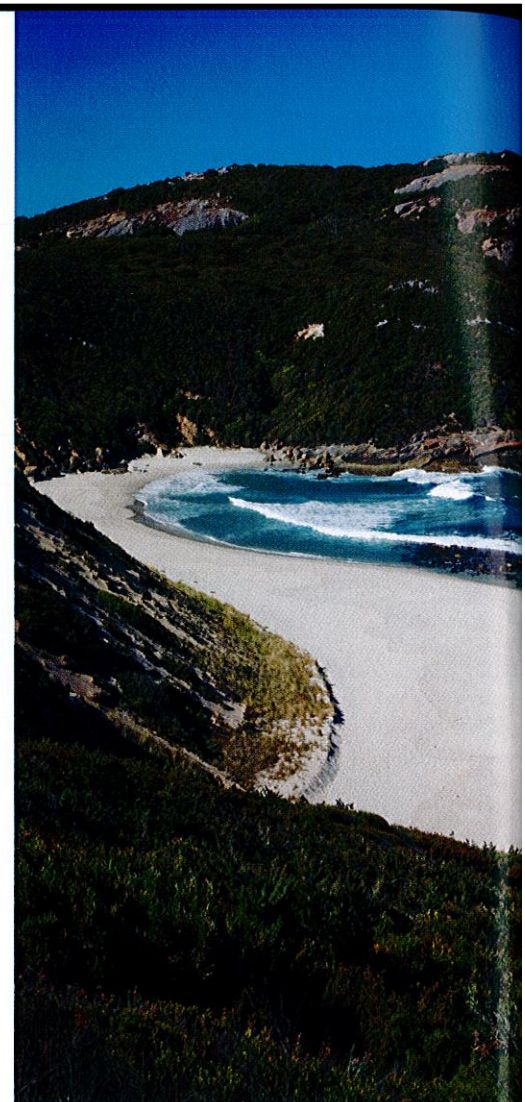
Below A rock fisherman takes a risk fishing off Cable Beach, a sandy bay on the southern side of Torndirrup National Park.
Photos - Andrew Halsall

Lucky escape

One 1964 trip took us to Torndirrup National Park, the dramatic peninsula of granite, limestone and heathland that forms the southern backdrop to King George Sound, across from the historic town of Albany. This was in the days before Western Australia's park managers had begun to disallow people taking their dogs into the national parks, so there was no problem in having Cassius along with us. We had planned to walk across the isthmus from Salmon Holes to Bald Head, and I was carrying a small haversack with a bottle of water and a couple of apples.

It was an excursion that was never completed.

Setting off from the Salmon Holes we first walked around the beach to where a massive granite outcrop shelves into the sea, and from which we could climb up to a rough fishermen's track that led out along the peninsula. It was one of those glorious south coast days, with a gentle south-easterly breeze, a sparkling sea, whirling gulls and gentle rollers cruising in to the beach or surging up onto the rock faces. Climbing steadily, Ellen and I had reached a point perhaps 150 metres above the shoreline, when we stopped for a breather and a



look around. Cassius was way below us, fossicking about in little clumps of scrub or snuffling among the rocks, probably looking for an abandoned fish carcass, and generally enjoying himself as a dog does.

We watched the scene below with pleasure ... and then suddenly with alarm. Out of nowhere, a giant wave swept in and surged up the rocks, at least 50 metres beyond the point at which any previous wave had reached. It caught Cassius, upended him and sucked him straight out to sea. He disappeared underwater momentarily, then reappeared and then disappeared again. In a moment or two we could see his head bobbing about among the rollers. He was well off shore and drifting further out.

Ellen gave a cry of fear and I gasped with anxiety. No dog could swim ashore in this situation. I knew immediately that Cassius was lost.

Just then a second huge wave appeared out of nowhere. It was not as big as the first one, but it surged powerfully. It caught Cassius up and swirled and tumbled him all the way inshore, depositing him way up on the



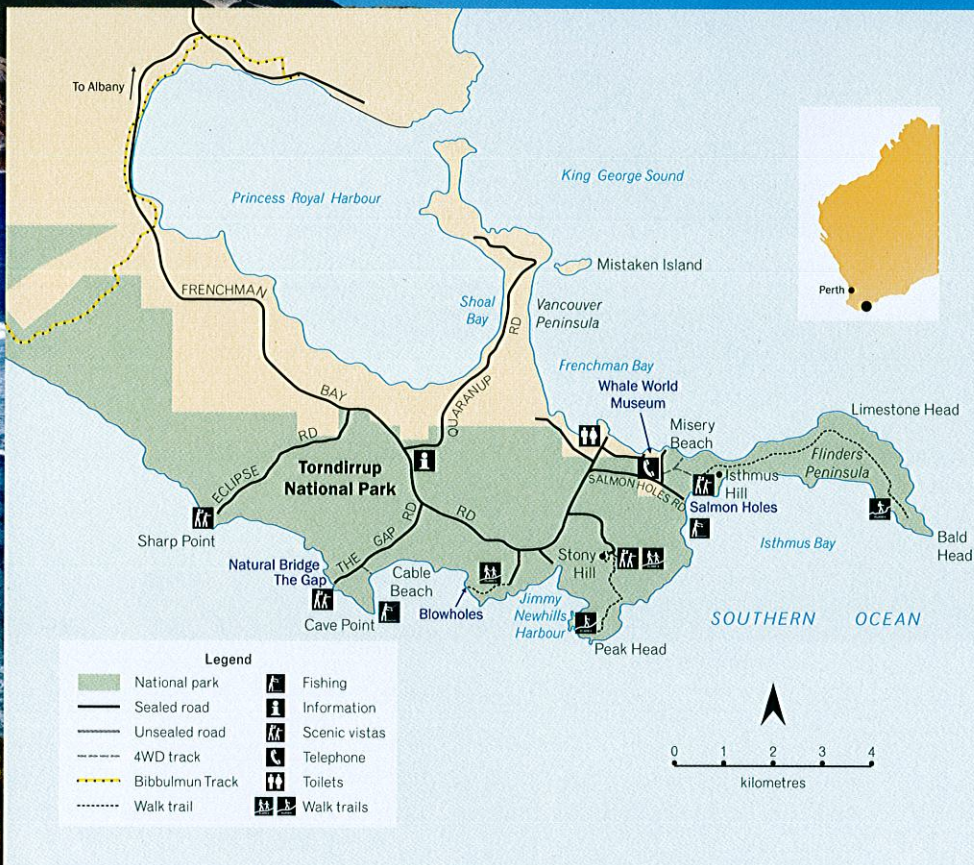
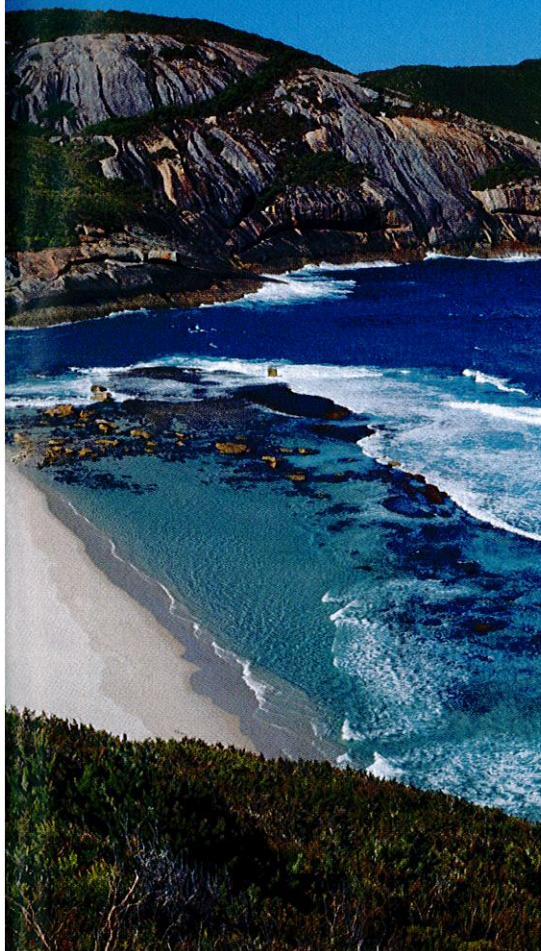
Improving rock fishing safety on the south coast

Salmon Holes has been the location of several rock fishing-related drownings over recent years. Since 2007, there have been 13 rock fishing deaths in Western Australia.

To enhance safety for rock fishers and promote a greater understanding of the potential dangers of ocean swells, the state government has provided \$300,000 over three years to the recreational fishing body Recfishwest.

Priority areas identified by the government, in consultation with Recfishwest, for new safety measures include Twilight Cove and Hellfire Bay at Esperance, Salmon Holes and Lowlands at Albany, and Kingie Rock and Long Pont in the Denmark-Walpole region.

At Salmon Holes, the Department of Parks and Wildlife has worked with Recfishwest to identify the location for rock fishing safety devices. Installation will occur later this year, when the dangerous winter swells typical of the Southern Ocean have passed, and in readiness for the coming summer.



rock face. Emerging from the froth and bubble, and steady on four legs, he shook himself vigorously, trotted off and resumed his snuffling in and around the rocks, looking for anything of interest. I whistled, and he lifted his head, erected his ears and came trotting up the rock to join us, wagging his tail, seemingly oblivious to recent events.

I have often wondered what went through his mind during his brief and life-threatening adventure. Probably not much. He was an intelligent dog, but was still only a dog; his emotional range was narrow and he had no sense of his own mortality.

What was going through our minds, on the other hand, was amazement and relief. I don't think either of us would have ever fully got over carrying a memory of his little head bobbing about in the waves, had he been swept out rather than swept in.

It doesn't pay to dwell on things like this, so we soon got over it, although it did dampen our enthusiasm for the walk to Bald Head. This was abandoned for something less stressful that day.

Nature strikes again

The second incident occurred nearby several years later. In 1973 Ellen and I (now married, and again living in Pemberton) were holidaying in Albany with our three children; Tim aged six, Jane aged four and Peter two. Cassius, I regret to say, was no longer with us.

Again it was a glorious south coast morning. The air was soft, and it was clear and sunny. A mild, briny breeze puffed in off the Southern Ocean, but the sea was almost calm, just the steady swell of the deep sea rollers. Eclipse Island, a mile or two offshore, stood out sharply, and figures could be seen walking around near the lighthouse keepers' cottages. We walked out to look at the little mainland lighthouse on its rocky headland just near Natural Bridge, and then climbed down to do some beachcombing on Cable Beach, a sandy bay on the southern side of Torndirrup National Park. Tim scampered ahead, Jane struggled after him and Peter slid down the dunes or perched on my shoulders, steering me with my ears, as was his wont.

Cable Beach is not all sand. At its western end there is a rocky bay

Above Salmon Holes in Torndirrup National Park.

Photo - Andrew Halsall

running parallel with the shoreline, set back about 50 metres from the spot where the spent waves fade and reverse themselves across the reef into the ocean. The rocks stand about two metres above the beach. It was an inviting spot for an adventurous family, so we all scrambled up to poke around for treasures among the boulders and rock pools.

Suddenly Ellen gave a shout of warning. Coming at us out of the sea was an enormous wave, reminiscent of the one that had captured Cassius all those years before. I just had time to grab Tim and Jane, one under each arm, and plant my feet, while Ellen grabbed little Peter and clutched him to her.

The wave crossed the beach above the height of the rocks and took us about waist high, before ending up at the foot of the far dunes. It was foaming and swirling powerfully. I just managed to stay upright, but Ellen was knocked off her feet and she and Peter went briefly under before scrambling up. Almost the second it passed, the



wave's energy subsided and the water dissipated and retreated. I put Tim and Jane down and went to see to Ellen and Peter. They were both okay, but cut and bruised.

In fact, we were all okay, but we beat a retreat back to the car and to our holiday home, needing (in Ellen and Peter's case) first aid, and (in mine) a stiff drink.

King wave menace

The two great waves we had experienced are known to south coast locals as 'king waves'. They are a well-known phenomenon on the south coast of Western Australia, and over the years many fishermen and tourists have been surprised by them, and swept out and drowned. In many cases these were people who knowingly placed themselves in danger under that other well-known phenomenon, the 'it can never happen to me' philosophy.

I knew nothing much about king waves in 1964 when the wave grabbed Cassius, but I was well-enough informed by 1973 to have made sure my family never got too close to the edge when clambering around south coast rocks. But even then, I had no idea that a wave of such massive proportions could just emerge from a relatively calm sea. In our situation there was, perhaps, only a small risk that we could have been swept out to sea, but we could easily have been

badly injured, and it was sheer luck that all of the kids were within reach when the wave bore down on us. There was no second wave to have washed one or more of them ashore.

Nevertheless, two lucky escapes is at least one too many. Thirty years later I am still super-cautious, knowing how an appreciation of the beauty of this area must be tempered with respect.

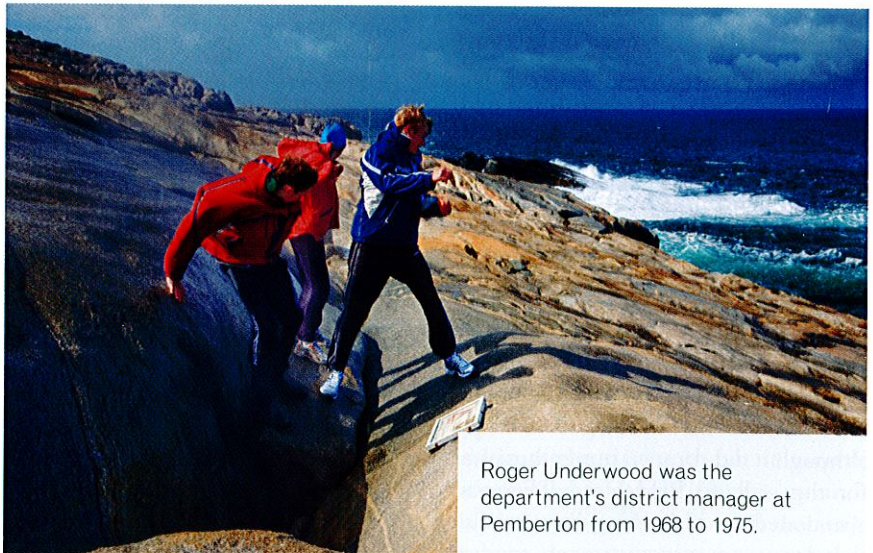
It is a lesson many others are yet to learn. On our recent visit we observed numerous occasions where people were taking enormous risks along the rocky shores of Torndirrup National Park, yet another example of the failure of the human species to learn from the experience of others.

Dogs in national parks

The exclusion of dogs from national parks is necessary to prevent them consuming 1080 baits which these days are often distributed to help eradicate introduced species. Some species of dogs may also pose a threat to native wildlife.

Above Natural Bridge in Torndirrup National Park. Note the tourists on the left.

Below Often people are unaware of the risks while visiting the Blowholes. Photos - Andrew Halsall



Roger Underwood was the department's district manager at Pemberton from 1968 to 1975.

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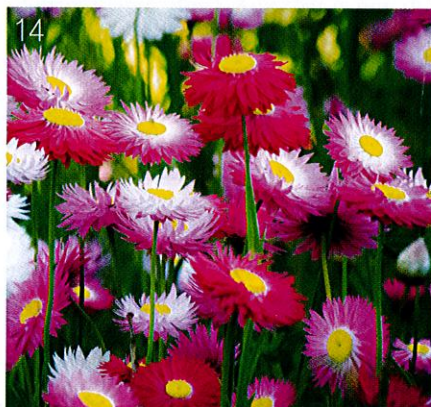
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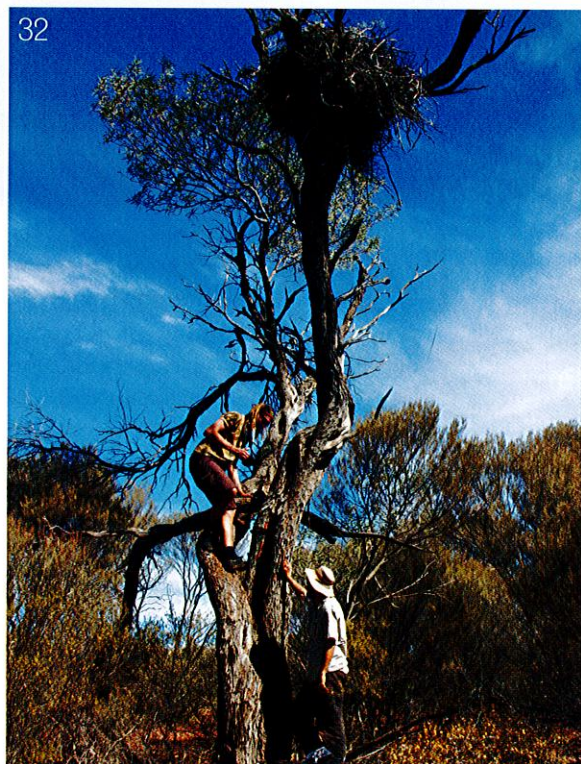
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