





Pat Barblett AM

by Samille Mitchell and Tracy Shea

This remarkably energetic woman has dedicated a lifetime's work as a volunteer to advocating the benefits of 'parks for people'. She firmly believes that both can benefit from mutual interaction.

Pat Barblett is sitting on a rock, near a gorge in Millstream-Chichester National Park, talking to an Aboriginal elder about country. The woman is sharing her deep connection to the land here, weaving tales of her totems, whispers of her spiritual beliefs. Pat leans forward to take in her words, struggling to hear against the scream of hundreds of white cockatoos squabbling in the treetops nearby. Pat feels alive, at one with the world and utterly privileged to be in this magical place learning its secrets from one of the elders who guard over it. For Pat, this is what life is all about—being amid nature, sharing stories and nurturing the soul's desire for connection, both with people and the land.

It's a scene that reflects Pat's life's calling. For Pat has dedicated her life to promoting 'interpretation' to help visitors learn the stories of the places they are visiting, while also advocating the 'healthy parks, healthy people' message. And despite the level of

dedication, Pat simply thrived on following her passion.

"People need natural places, particularly today," she says. "It's a different world with people spending their days in front of computers or TV screens. We're losing our spiritual connection with nature, but we need it to sustain our life and soul. And parks need us too. Once we learn a park's stories, people realise how valuable they are and we need good management to help people spend time in parks without damaging them."

Providing guidance on such management became Pat's career, albeit an unpaid one. Her work spans decades, first on the Rottnest Island Board, which later became the Rottnest Island Authority, then with the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority, which later became the Conservation Commission of Western Australia. Pat also dedicated time to the Forum Advocating Cultural Eco Tourism, not to mention various others.

Main The rainforests of Mitchell River National Park are just some of the areas protected by the management planning process that Pat was involved in streamlining.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Inset Pat Barblett.

Photo – Courtesy of Pat Barblett



THE BEGINNINGS

But it wasn't always this way. Born and raised in Melbourne, Pat first came to Western Australia as part of a netball team trip. Fresh out of university, where she'd studied physical education, she noticed an advertisement for a job as a physical education teacher at St Hilda's Anglican College, applied for the job on a whim, got it and moved west.

Later, married and in the midst of rearing five children, she found "study fitted in with her lifestyle" and embarked on further education, eventually adding a Graduate Diploma of Recreation, Post Graduate Diploma of Public History, Diploma of Environmental Interpretation, Diploma of Photography and Certificate of Archival Administration to her existing Bachelor of Education and Diploma of Physical Education qualifications. Oh yes, and she's part way through a research degree in Master of Arts in History too.

It was while studying for her Graduate Diploma of Recreation that she had her first significant contact with government. A former minister seeking to have more women on government boards had heard of Pat through written university work on Rottnest.

The minister asked if she could put Pat's name forward for a position on the Rottnest Island Board and, much to Pat's surprise, she was appointed as the first woman to the board. "I think at first they didn't know what to do with me to be quite honest," she says.

Pat used the position to champion what was then an unheard of tool in recreational management in WA—interpretation. She could see the way that informative signs and other interpretive methods could enhance a visitor's experience of a place, how they could reveal the secrets of an area's past or its natural wonders. Interpretation could bring even the seemingly dulllest area to life when people learned of its relevance.

During Pat's 17 years on the Rottnest Island Board and Authority, including the

last three as chair, she founded the Rottnest Island Voluntary Guides (and is now their patron), the Rottnest Island Museum and transformed the Kingstown Barracks into an environmental education centre for school groups and teachers. Her work also provided experience in managing recreational areas, which stood her in great stead for her next role on the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority, predecessor to the Conservation Commission of WA. Integral to the authority's work was the development of management plans to guide how natural areas, particularly national parks, would be managed—a balancing act of conserving the environment, providing recreation and protecting cultural and historical sites.

And this is where Pat hit her stride.

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Above left Pat examining the Rabbit Proof Fence.

Photo – Conservation Commission of WA

Above Receiving the Sir David Brand Medal in 2003 from Lady Brand.

Right The Rottnest Island Authority honoured Pat by naming a cabin after her in the Thomson Bay settlement.

Photos – Courtesy of Pat Barblett





Above Pat (far right) on a Conservation Commission of WA field trip in 2008.
 Photo – Conservation Commission of WA

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A PASSION FOUND

What followed was a whirlwind of travel, debate, planning and policy development. Pat became renowned for rolling up her sleeves, cutting through the red tape and getting the job done. Long-time associate and Department of Parks and Wildlife assistant director for policy and planning Tracy Shea says Pat is an inspiration.

“Pat has passion, innovation, is very practical and likes to see results,” Tracy says. “She is able to cut through unnecessary detail and has led a process in recent years to simplify and streamline the management planning process. Even after going to so many meetings over the years she is still as passionate as ever. Passion like that is a very rare thing.”

Pat’s work on management plans took her to every corner of the state—from the pockets of rainforest in the Kimberley’s

Mitchell Plateau, to the woodlands of the Goldfields and the tree-cloaked expanses of the south. “I’ve been fortunate to see so much of the state in such a special way,” she says. “I’ve made so many friends and been very privileged.”

Such travel also put her in contact with many Aboriginal people. “Their connection to the land is something that is part of them,” she says. “We can learn so much about land management from them. To me it made sense that they be involved in the management planning process.” And Pat worked to make that happen. In particular, she was an enthusiastic supporter of the Yoorrooyang Dawang proposed conservation park’s draft management plan, which is part of the Miriuwung and Gajerrong people’s country.

Another major management plan that Pat worked on was for the Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes area, both as a member of the Conservation Commission and as an

observer on the Capes Community Advisory Committee. Her local knowledge and contacts in the community enabled her to make an invaluable contribution to the plan.

In addition to this work, Pat strove to raise awareness of the state’s conservation estate through her work with the Conservation Commission. Tracy says Pat’s selfless dedication to the job was astounding. “Her passion for promoting sustainable tourism and the value of a healthy parks system to community health has shone through in every position she has held, and has inspired so many people,” Tracy says.

“Pat has an amazing ability to connect people and make things happen, and has been a mentor to so many people in government and the tourism industry. She works tirelessly to promote parks and the community’s connection to them. She has made a huge contribution to the parks industry during her lifetime”.



PROMOTER OF CULTURAL TOURISM

Through her work on Rottneest Island and with the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority, Pat became committed to the idea of cultural heritage tourism and, at a conference on the subject, realised that many people were working in the area in isolation. She founded the Forum Advocating Cultural and Eco Tourism (FACET) to help bring them together. What began as an informal gathering has grown to become a major player in Western Australian tourism development today, 22 years later.

After 17 years with the Conservation Commission of Western Australia, Pat resigned but her workload has barely lessened. She continues to be an advocate for Aboriginal heritage and culture through FACET and any other way she can.

Pat also founded the Rottneest Foundation in 1993 to raise money for improvements to the island. The foundation's current focus is raising funds for a walk trail around the island. It is also working on providing recognition of an Aboriginal burial ground on the island that is home to 400 unmarked graves.

Pat also serves on the board of the WA Maritime Museum. Such dedication earned her a Sir David Brand Medal in 2003, a Western Australian Tourism Award in 2003, a Member of the Order of Australia, AM, in 2004, a Prime Minister's Medal in 2004, the

Sir Edmund Hillary Parks Award in 2012 and the inaugural FACET Medal in 2012.

How does she maintain the enthusiasm after all this time? "I love what I'm doing," she says. "I think something guides me. I go from one thing to the next and it all just opens up before me. I love it. I just love it. I'm so grateful to have been given the opportunity."

Above Pat founded the Rottneest Foundation to raise money and advocate for improvements to the island.

Photo – Marie Lochman

Below Pat (third from the left) with members of the Conservation Commission of WA at Mount Meharry in Karijini National Park in 2005.

Photo – Conservation Commission of WA



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