

Kalbarri National Park and Kalbarri town have grown up together, depending on each other for survival. Fifty years since their inception, there's a lot to be proud of.

BY RORY CHAPPLE



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Above New boardwalk section of the Bigurda Trail.

Photo – Samille Mitchell

Inset Kalbarri's first school teacher and one of Kalbarri's pioneering conservationists, Ross Graham, with the first cohort of students in 1959.

Photo – S.R. White

Left New facilities at The Loop.

Photo – Parks and Wildlife



A TRUE LOCAL: KALBARRI NATIONAL PARK

George Grey described Kalbarri as “one of the most romantic and picturesque-looking estuaries I had yet seen” after landing there when exploring the Western Australia coast in 1839. He was to document, for the first time, a beautiful and bountiful area so teeming with food resources that it was able to support large numbers of Aboriginal Australians.

Long before European settlers arrived in the Kalbarri area, Aboriginal people known as the Nanda inhabited the region’s diverse and spectacular environment. The Nanda lived in an area stretching from modern-day Kalbarri and Northampton north to Shark Bay, where the Malgana also lived. Jump forward more than 100

years after Grey arrived, to the late 1940s, and those same attributes – natural beauty and bountiful natural resources – were again attracting people to the area known as the ‘Mouth of the Murch’. The fishing was good, weather was warmer than further south and people were willing to endure the long hours of travelling along sandy and boggy tracks to reach their dream holiday location. A de facto town site of a dozen or so squatter shacks had started to emerge.

While many new residents sought the fishing and relaxed lifestyle, there was also a growing awareness of the spectacular landscape that surrounded the area. Towering sandstone and limestone cliffs extended coastwards to the north

and south, while, further inland, the mighty Murchison River carved through layered sandstone forming an awe-inspiring gorge. In addition, rare plants and animals inhabited the land. For some, these magnificent natural values were a big drawcard.

It wasn’t long before the town’s growth and plans to conserve the area clashed. In the late 1940s squatters were putting pressure on the State Government to release freehold and leasehold land and establish a formal town site. A decision about whether a town could be created was deferred in 1948 to enable the WA State Gardens Board to consider options for conservation. Then, in 1949, the Town Planning

Commissioner recommended that the whole area be made a national park. However, the demand for formal housing and infrastructure was too strong and by 1951 the formal town site of Kalbarri was gazetted. Fifty lots of land were released and quickly snatched up for between £55 and £75 each.



It took more than 10 years for the new name of 'Kalbarri' to be used by local residents. There was no public consultation and they preferred the colloquial name: 'Mouth of the Murch'. Kalbarri, which was the name of a local Indigenous man of a Murchison tribe and that of an edible seed, only became commonly used after the Kalbarri Post Office opened in 1963.

A NATIONAL PARK IS CREATED

In the decade following the gazettal of the fledgling town, life remained pretty basic. There were no facilities such as telephones, schools or police, and power generation was a 'set up your own' affair. The rough road out to the highway near Binnu was described by early resident Howie Sangster as "just a sand track full of potholes and corrugations – rough enough to dislodge your false teeth!"

In 1960 the population was still only about 50 people. A small school had been established and was attended by 10 children. A young man by the name of Ross Graham was the school's first teacher and he frequently took the students out

to learn about and experience nature. In particular, they visited the inland gorge country along the Murchison, where the more southerly gorge sections could be explored.

Ross's enthusiasm for nature and his desire to protect the gorge was evident to all who knew him. Keen to protect against destruction, he erected a sign at one of the entry points that warned against damage, quoting his authority 'N.A.J.C.S', which stood for 'no authority just common sense'. Tragically, Ross died from a brain tumour at the age of 31. His passion for the natural history of Kalbarri wasn't forgotten and, a few years after he died, a visitor site with a lookout was named in his honour – the Ross Graham Lookout.

Another enthusiastic local – Eric Pederick – also played a key role in preserving the area. In 1963, Eric was the first person to drive a vehicle into the Murchison River gorges. Armed with just a map and compass with no roads to follow, he drove a car straight through the scrub to locate the gorge. He was awestruck by the scenery, in particular the area around Z Bend and Four Ways, which he considered the best of all. At the time he commented that "if ever there was a place for a wildlife sanctuary, this is it".

Like Ross Graham before him, Eric Pederick was passionate about protecting this local natural treasure. He advocated for the National Parks Board to assume responsibility for as much of the land as possible – trusting that its influence would stop any unrestrained destruction. Eric's hopes became reality when government officials, led by the then Premier Sir David Brand, came and inspected the gorges.



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Above left Mushroom Rock, Kalbarri National Park.

Photo – Ann Storr

Left The spectacular and rugged coastline looking out to the Indian Ocean.

Photo – Samille Mitchell

Right Looking out from across the Murchison River which is dry at certain times of the year.
Photo – Parks and Wildlife

Below right This beach shack was typical of the early camps in about 1950.
Photo – Courtesy Jessie Lowrie

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Shortly after, on 22 November 1963, the government apportioned an area of about 149,000ha as a Class 'A' national park.

For the next 50 years, a unique relationship developed between the tiny coastal town and the national park that surrounded it. Millions of visitors came to be inspired and moved by the park's natural beauty. And they brought with them money, which created jobs and helped build the foundations of the vibrant tourist town that Kalbarri is known as today. Locals also developed a love of the park and were drawn back again and again. As the town grew so did the park's popularity and the link between people and the park became inextricable.

THE PARK: THE EARLY YEARS

Following the park's gazettal in 1963 increasing tourist numbers necessitated a greater commitment to park management. The change from seasonal mobile rangers to a permanent staff member occurred in 1968 when a ranger's house was built for resident ranger Reg Gliddon.

Accompanied by his wife Joan, Reg spent time exploring remote and rugged sections of the park. Joan recalls the difficulty of just getting to one gorge:

"We had not ventured far off the beaten track when the wheels went down and we were properly bogged. Once out of that with the help of spade and winch I thought we would head for home. But, no way! Another track offered and we broke off that on high ground through the bush, winding like a snake ... two punctures were mended but on we went 'til we emerged through the thicket and found ourselves looking down on the river far below."



" ... Kalbarri, which was the name of a local Indigenous man of a Murchison tribe and that of an edible seed, only became commonly used after the Kalbarri Post Office opened in 1963."

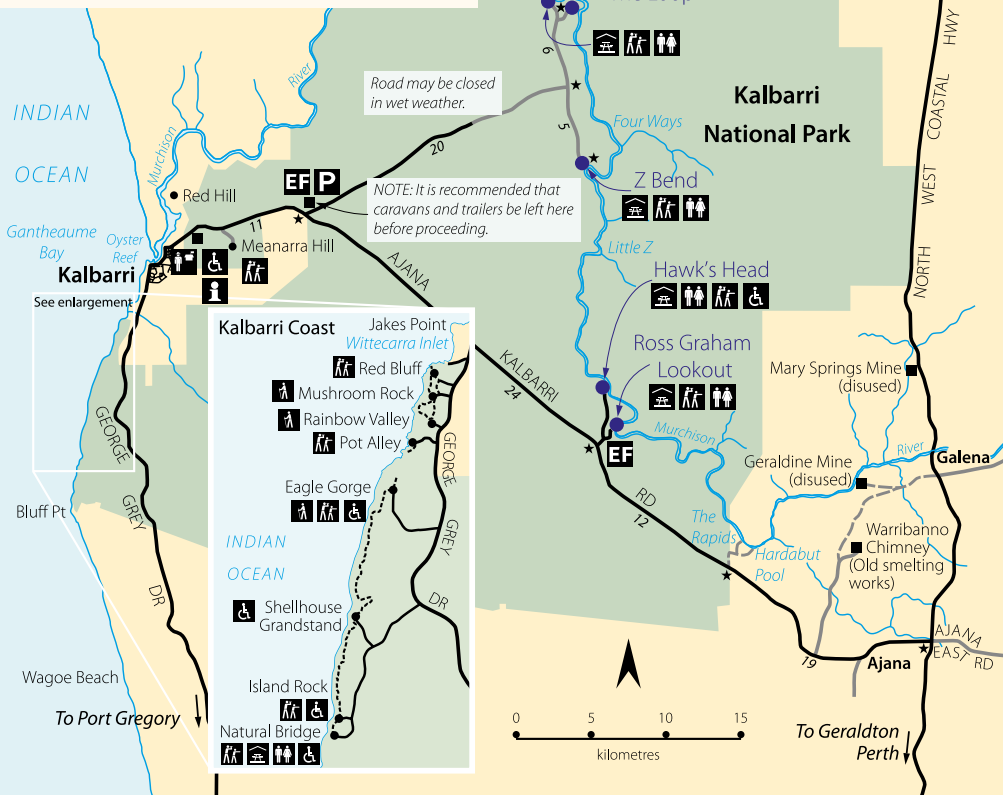
Tragically, after only one year in the job, Reg died of cancer at the age of 54.

Locals, impressed by the gorge scenery, were certain they could make a living by running tours into the park. Ernie Grinham, a park pioneer and an honorary ranger, started conducting tours in the late 1960s using a kombi van. While the van had the required ground clearance to get

through the rough tracks there was always the chance of it getting bogged. Ernie would tell passengers from the outset that if they got bogged it was their role to push the kombi out!

The Grinham family began a longstanding connection between commercial tourism and the park. Other tour operators eventually started canoeing

- Legend**
- National park
 - Sealed road
 - Unsealed road
 - Track
 - Walk trail
 - Distance in kilometres
 - Bushwalking trail
 - Entrance fee
 - Information
 - Parking
 - Picnic tables
 - Ranger station
 - Scenic vistas
 - Sheltered picnic tables
 - Toilets
 - Universal access



Above Kalbarri National Park attracts locals and tourists of all ages.
Photo – Samille Mitchell

and abseiling businesses (see also ‘Parks for People: Canoeing Kalbarri National Park’, *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2014). Back in town, the number of commercial holiday accommodation options exploded as people flocked to the area to explore the national park.

THE 1970s: SIGNIFICANT GROWTH

During the mid-1970s, Kalbarri experienced a period of rapid growth with a new sealed road from the highway making the town more accessible. The town’s population grew more than five-fold from 120 residents in 1970 to 695 by 1976. Long-time resident Howard Gliddon recalls “The town was growing so quickly that every time they put a new motor in the power house we were ready for another one!”

Cecil ‘Tiddles’ Cockman was appointed ranger of the national park and faced the task of managing the escalating tourist numbers. In order to manage

visitor use and minimise unruly behaviour, gates were erected and honour boxes fitted. The first attempt at a user-pays system was not well received by visitors and the local community. Tiddles’s wife Nancy recalls “... before long that gate was smashed and the box burnt. So obviously people weren’t happy with the idea of ‘user pays’, although the requested donation was only 20c!”

Tiddles’s role as ranger-in-charge was amazingly varied. On one occasion he was called to the aid of a neighbour. An accident had occurred and a worker was run over and killed by a bulldozer. Tiddles was asked to recover the body and drive to Northampton with it on the back of the park ute. He was also called on when the 1979 Miss Universe contest came to town. A bevy of beautiful ladies descended on the park’s coastal sites for swimsuit voting. Tiddles was required to supervise the high-heeled, bikini-clad contestants and support them as they

negotiated the rugged tracks down to the beach. Posing for a photo with one of the contestants was, no doubt, just part of the job.

As the park’s popularity continued to grow the toilet facilities struggled to keep up with demand. Reg Gliddon installed a toilet out at The Loop car park that boasted a magnificent view right down a spectacular section of gorge, but it lacked critical capacity. It was basically a bucket with a seat on top and it wasn’t unusual for rangers to arrive at lunchtime on a busy day to find the toilet bucket overflowing! Sick of emptying the waste buckets by hand and facing a revolt from his assistant rangers tasked to clean them, new ranger-in-charge, Roy Harris, made it his mission to fix the situation. By installing long-drop toilets soon after his arrival in 1982 he ended the more than 10-year reign of Kalbarri’s infamous pan toilets known locally as ‘Reg’s Dubs’!



A PERIOD OF DEVELOPMENT

By now, Kalbarri was firmly established as one of WA's prime tourism destinations. The national park was critical to the economic success of the local tourism industry and by the mid-1980s about 150,000 people visited it each year. The pressure was on to improve both facilities at and access to the park's attractions.

Progressively, visitor sites were upgraded to handle the increasing tourism traffic. Mike Paxman took over from senior ranger Roy Harris in 1999 and, since then, has overseen the most dramatic improvements to the park's infrastructure. This has been particularly important at the park's coastal sites where visitation has increased considerably since the alternate coastal road linking Port Gregory, Northampton and Kalbarri was sealed. The rangers have worked tirelessly on improvements to the coastal sites – building boardwalks, realigning trails, and establishing toilets, shade shelters and lookouts. These works resulted in the team receiving the coveted Western Australian Coastal Award for Excellence in 2013.

At the inland gorges, similar improvements have taken place. In 2004 the road to the inland gorge sites of the

Biodiversity in danger

Kalbarri National Park's floral diversity is comparable to that of Queensland's tropical rainforests. From the early 1960s local flora enthusiasts led by Don and Barbara Bellairs searched for, discovered and collected many flora species, including some of the State's rarest and most endangered. Today, the park is home to hundreds of species of plant including spectacular wildflowers that attract visitors from far and wide.

The park is also home to threatened animals but, unfortunately, it has experienced a familiar and devastating story. Introduced animals, including the fox and feral cat, have had an immense impact on the park's fauna. By the time the park was gazetted, several species of mammal were heading for local extinction. Successive rangers experienced the loss of species first-hand. Cecil Cockman found the carcass of what was the last known tammar wallaby (*Macropus eugenii*) in the park. While a small population of black-footed rock-wallabies (*Petrogale lateralis*) survived in the rugged parts of the gorge system until the 1990s, the last confirmed sighting was by a park ranger in 1991.

The war on feral animals was waged by successive rangers using both unconventional and sophisticated methods. In the early days, boys from the local football club would catch goats as part of their annual fundraiser. This was phased out by Roy Harris, much to the chagrin of the locals, who instead armed his rangers and gave them a licence to shoot the goats on sight. In recent times goat control operations moved to more sophisticated aerial shooting and, since 2006, a culling program has dramatically reduced goat numbers.

Fox control has also been a focus. Widespread baiting undertaken by the Department of Parks and Wildlife and its predecessors through the *Western Shield* program has been running in the park continually since 1996. This had an immediate impact on fox numbers and paved the way for reintroductions of locally extinct animals. Chuditch



Above Black-footed rock-wallabies may be relocated back into the Murchison Gorge.
*Photo – Jiri Lochman/Lochman
Transparencies*

(*Dasyurus geoffroii*), which had not been seen in the park for decades, were successfully reintroduced. A healthy breeding population now lives in the gorge system and is expanding into other areas of the park.

Recent reintroductions of tammar wallabies and woylies (*Bettongia penicillata*) haven't been as successful. Populations have existed for short periods only, most likely as a result of predation by foxes and feral cats. Developing and implementing an integrated fox and feral cat baiting program will improve the success of fauna reintroductions.

Most exciting is the potential for rock-wallabies to be reintroduced to the park. The Murchison Gorge represents the best remaining habitat for this species and it is possible that animals from the Wheatbelt could be relocated to the park in an effort to set up a new population. This will spread the genetic diversity of this species and help to ensure the future of the rock-wallaby.



Ross Graham Lookout and Hawk's Head was sealed and modern facilities were installed at the car parks, almost doubling visitor numbers as a result.

Other significant improvements were made at other inland gorge sites. Hiking facilities were greatly improved as trails were realigned to improve visitor safety and new ones were constructed to improve the tourism experience.

RECENT IMPROVEMENTS

In 2013, Kalbarri National Park celebrated its 50th year, which brought with it several exciting developments. A management plan for the park was drafted in consultation with the community and made available for public comment. The final plan will guide future operations for at least the next 10 years.

Coinciding with the draft plan's release was the largest infrastructure development to ever occur in the park. The State Government invested more than \$7.7 million in roads and facilities at the park. Twelve kilometres of the main Murchison Gorge spur road was sealed, with plans to seal the remainder in coming years. And the park's most popular tourist site – The Loop – received a major overhaul with new toilets, a car park, lookouts, paths and shade shelters.

Fascinating finds

Occasionally when work is being done in parks around the State something really interesting turns up. When excavating for the recent road and car park upgrade at The Loop, a contractor unearthed a 120-million-year-old fossil ammonite, a marine creature much like a coiled nautilus. This particular ammonite, known as *Tropaeum*, is closely related to present-day cuttlefish, squid and octopuses, and can measure up to 1m in diameter.

The biggest surprise was that the fossil shell was found in an area of sandstone about 450 million years old, well below the top of the river valley, yet the animal was supposedly only about 120 million years old!

When scientists looked closely at the rock containing the fossil the mystery was solved: it was whiter and much lighter than the surrounding sandstone. They identified it as Windalia Radiolarite,



Above A fossil unearthed during excavations.

Photo – Rory Chapple/Parks and Wildlife

a type of rock from the early Cretaceous period and seen in the white cliffs north of Kalbarri across the river. The most likely explanation for its presence was that a seaway or drowned valley extended up the river gorge, eroded into the older sandstone, at least as far as The Loop, 120 million years ago.

Above left Access isn't always easy for vehicles involved in park upgrades.

Photo – Parks and Wildlife

Right Kalbarri Trail.

Photo – Alicia Dyson

The trail down to Nature's Window was also upgraded to improve pedestrian access and a nearby site – Inyaka Wookai Watju (West Loop Lookout) – was fully redeveloped with a new car park, toilets and a spectacular new lookout.

A BOND BETWEEN PEOPLE AND PARK

For 50 years, the people of Kalbarri have formed a strong bond with the park that surrounds their town. The town and park have grown up together, hand-in-hand, almost mirrored in age and development. Built from scratch by dedicated locals, including a handful of rangers, some pioneering tour operators and visionary nature enthusiasts, the park is truly a representation of the Kalbarri community.



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