





OUR SOUTH-WEST ESCAPE

THE LEEUWIN- NATURALISTE CAPES

The stunning Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes area offers a host of things to do and places to explore for visitors and the many people who call it home, all while supporting an abundance of native plants and animals. A management plan for the parks and reserves of the area will guide how this special place will be managed, to ensure it can be enjoyed for generations to come.

BY JOANNA MOORE



Heading ‘down south’ to Western Australia’s beautiful south-west corner is a popular getaway, whether for a weekend escape or a longer holiday. And it’s no wonder. The area’s pristine beaches offer world-famous surfing and spectacular snorkelling, or simply beautiful places to enjoy a laze on the sand, play in the wash or go looking for things that have washed ashore. Meanwhile, the exceptional forests provide an opportunity to reconnect with nature along the area’s many drives, rides and hikes, and at the places along the way where you can stop and enjoy a picnic or camp overnight. The multitude of nature-based tourism and recreational activities include exploring the fascinating cave and karst system, visiting the two historical lighthouses and learning about the area’s significant Aboriginal heritage.

Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park alone draws some 2.7 million visits a year, making it the most popular national park in WA. And, while visitors arrive with their boats, bathers and surfboards, their hiking, fishing and caving gear, and their cameras and wildflower books, the locals too feel a strong connection to this patch. Many of those who live in Augusta, Margaret River and Dunsborough, and the smaller towns

in between, have strong attachments with the natural landscapes that surround them. Their lifestyles, and often livelihoods too, are connected to the environment through the beach culture and the inspiration drawn from the wetland, forest, cave and karst and coastal environments.

This brings with it an ever-increasing pressure on the very values for which the area is cherished. The *Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes area parks and reserves management plan 2014* will manage the values of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes area. In addition to Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park, it includes Scott and Bramley national parks, Gingilup Swamps Nature Reserve, plus a range of other smaller national parks, nature reserves, timber reserves and State forest. At more than 21,000ha Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park is the area’s largest park, with the others ranging in size significantly, some being less than a hectare.

Together they cover almost 37,500ha extending 95km along the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge, from Cape Naturaliste in the north to Cape Leeuwin in the south and a further 36km east of Augusta along the Scott Coastal Plain. The area covered by the management plan extends across three local government areas – Busselton,

Augusta-Margaret River and Nannup – and is less than 250km, or three hours drive south of Perth.

It is this easy access, combined with its proximity to the hundreds of local wineries, breweries, restaurants, art galleries and makers of gourmet produce, plus heritage and cultural sites and much more, all located among striking visual landscapes, that contributes to the area’s popularity.

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Main Shelley Cove.

Photo – Andrew McInnes

Above left Cape Leeuwin.

Above Acacia forest, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park.

Photos – Ann Storrie

Opposite page

Left Wetlands at Biljedup Cliffs.

Photo – Marie Lochman

Right Red-tailed black cockatoos.

Photo – Sallyanne Cousans



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A HOTSPOT FOR BIODIVERSITY

These landscapes contain a range of natural values including an extensive karst system, important wetlands and conservation-significant species and communities. In fact, the Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes area sits within Australia’s only internationally recognised biodiversity hotspot – one of just 35 in the world. A biodiversity hotspot is a biologically significant region that supports high numbers of plants and animals that can only be found in that area and that also face a high degree of threat. The internationally recognised south-west region is one of Australia’s 15 national terrestrial biodiversity hotspots.

BLOOMING VARIETY

The flora of the area contributes significantly to this international and national recognition, and the stunning wildflower display from July to November is another drawcard for visitors. Like many parks and reserves

in the south-west, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park is rich in the number of plant species it houses, particularly because it encompasses a range of ecological communities. Overall, the Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes area contains some 1577 native vascular species, representing 198 families, including the orchids, peas and acacias, eucalypts and paperbarks, sedges, banksias, grevillea and hakea, and daisies.

Twelve species of rare flora occur in the area including the Dunsborough spider orchid (*Caladenia viridescens*), Scott River boronia (*Boronia exilis*) and Naturaliste nancy (*Wurmbea calcicola*). There are also dozens of priority-listed species, several geographically significant species, and many which are at the edge of their range. For example, the population of karri (*Eucalyptus diversicolor*) at Boranup – a popular scenic location – is separated by more than 10km from its most northern occurrence at Cape Clairault and those of the lower Blackwood River.

WETLANDS

The area includes two nationally significant wetlands – the Gingilup-Jasper wetland system and the permanent Cape Leeuwin system. It also contains part of a candidate site proposed for nomination under the international Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, which includes Forest Grove National Park, a small reserve and also an area of private property. This site provides important habitat for the critically endangered white bellied frog (*Geocrinia alba*), which is thought to occupy an area of just 1.9km².

CAVES AROUND

The Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge has a unique geology, including several hundred karst features. These include dolines, caves, solution pipes, root casts and subterranean drainage channels. The highest concentration of caves occurs in the Boranup area, while many sea caves can be seen along the coast around Cape Naturaliste. These landscape features are beautiful and irreplaceable.

They are also significant for the important subterranean communities they support, as well as for cultural heritage, visitor recreation, and education and research opportunities. Interesting finds have been made, such as fossils and archaeological specimens, including evidence of Noongar occupation and remains of extinct marsupials, reptiles and birds. These caves have been a major drawcard to the region for generations, and access is now carefully managed to conserve these important systems, while maintaining access for people to experience.

SPECIAL RESIDENTS

Land clearing, the introduction of exotic species (particularly foxes and cats), climate change, and changing hydrological and fire regimes have all impacted native animals found in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes area. While several extinctions have occurred since European settlement, the area still remains one of high value and priority for fauna conservation. Surveys indicate that there are at least 29 mammals (including four bat species), more than 128 bird species, 11 species of frog (all endemic to the south-west), 33 reptile species, nine fish species (of which six are endemic) and 54 invertebrates.

Fifteen threatened species have been recorded in the area including the quokka (*Setonix brachyurus*), chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*), brush-tailed phascogale (*Phascogale tapoatafa*) and western ringtail possum (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*). This also includes birds such as the forest red-tailed black cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii naso*), Baudin's cockatoo (*C. baudinii*), Carnaby's cockatoo (*C. latirostris*), Hutton's shearwater (*Puffinus huttoni*) and Australasian bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*).

COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Locals as well as visitors from across WA, interstate and overseas are drawn to the south-west corner's natural playgrounds to challenge themselves through outdoor activities such as hiking, kayaking and abseiling, to commune with nature, or to simply relax. Many organisations, groups and individuals play an active role helping with management activities, and community involvement has been central to planning for its ongoing management. As part of this, a draft management plan for the area was released for public comment by the Conservation Commission of Western Australia in December 2010. More than 130 submissions were made on the plan.

Balancing visitor use with protecting natural, cultural and heritage values is essential. The final plan will allow for recreational activities while ensuring



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Top Western ringtail possum.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above New Holland honeyeater.
Photo – Andrew McInnes

Right Abseiling at Wilyabrup Cliffs.
Photo – Jiri Lochman





Above left Quindalup Beach.
Photo – Natasha Moore

Above Trekking the Cape to Cape Track.
Photo – Alicia Dyson

Left Dunsborough spider orchid (*Caladenia viridescens*).
Photo – Ann Storrie

Far left Surfing at Reef Break.
Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies

natural, cultural and heritage values are maintained.

Some of the comments received on the draft management plan centred on fire management. Bushfire is a real and significant threat across the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge and Scott Coastal Plain, and managing this threat is complex and challenging for many reasons. These include the area’s mix of land tenures and land-use types, the fragmented nature of Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park – which has a very large perimeter for its area – and the potential impacts of mitigation strategies on small businesses, particularly in the tourism and viticultural industries.

Adding to this is the impact of drier climatic conditions which increase the risk of potentially damaging bushfire conditions and make it harder to manage and control fire, strong coastal winds,

the variety of coastal, wetland and forest vegetation types, and the need to protect the area’s important conservation values. And of course the popularity of the area as a tourist destination means there are many visitor recreation sites in bushfire risk areas along the coast and in bushland. In addition, there are many homes dotted throughout the area – often surrounded by bushland – that people live in full-time or use on holidays and weekends, or for holiday rental accommodation.

Fire management strategies tackle these challenges through prescribed burning, mechanical fuel management, the identification of asset and strategic protection areas, and detailed planning between State Government agencies, local government, traditional owners, community and volunteer groups, adjacent land managers and private landholders. All



have responsibilities in protecting human life, community assets, sites of cultural and heritage significance, and biodiversity.

RECREATIONAL PURSUITS

A highlight of the area is the Cape to Cape Track, which runs 135km from Cape Naturaliste to Cape Leeuwin, through Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park, where New Holland honeyeaters (*Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*) and other animals entertain walkers with their antics. The section of the track from the Cape Naturaliste lighthouse precinct to Sugarloaf Rock has been upgraded to enable 'Access for More' – providing access to people in wheelchairs or with walking sticks or aids, as well as parents pushing prams. It is part of a more intensively developed precinct that includes a new car park and toilet facilities, as well as interpretive material for visitors, including a display about the 100 orchid species that can be found between the capes. This area receives high visitation and these upgrades help it manage this, as well as enabling a wide range of people to access and enjoy the stunning natural landscapes.

There is a strong sense of community ownership for many sites throughout the Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes area. Locals and special interest groups feel a deep connection to places visited over many years or even generations, and want to be able to return again and again to their special spot, having it retain the particular attributes that makes it significant to them. Sites of Aboriginal cultural significance are found throughout the area, particularly along the coast, and these are another important consideration in determining which areas are appropriate for recreation development. Many are listed on the Register of Aboriginal Sites, including Ellensbrook, or Mokidup, an important cultural site to Noongar people.

The Boranup area hosts the widest range of recreational activities of any site



Left Cowaramup Brook.
Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies

Top right Slender lobelia (*Lobelia tenuior*).
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Far right The area provides many opportunities for hiking.
Photo – Pippa Moore

Right Yellow tailflower (*Anthocercis littorea*).
Photo – Marie Lochman

Below right The 'Access for More' walk to Sugarloaf Rock.
Photo – Pippa Moore

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in Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park. Visitors to the area can enjoy camping, caving, bushwalking, horseriding, mountain biking and four-wheel driving. It contains threatened ecological communities, karst features and habitat for the critically endangered white-bellied frog. An impact study of the area will be carried out to identify what recreational activities can occur there. This will guide future management of the area to ensure recreation and conservation are carried out hand-in-hand.

Major improvements to visitor facilities are underway at Conto Campground – a popular camping site south of Margaret River – thanks to a \$1 million investment under the State Government's \$21.05 million *Parks for People* initiative. This provides for a range of affordable camping and caravan options to ensure people have access to enjoy and experience WA's natural and iconic areas. A number of upgrades are planned for Conto Campground, such as an additional 30 camp sites which will accommodate about 80 campers, as well as new kitchens and toilets. The lighthouse precincts remain ever popular, bookending the Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes (see 'Beacons of the capes', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 2005–06). And of course Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park is intimately

connected to the recently gazetted Ngari Capes Marine Park – a wonderland of marine values and recreation opportunities (see 'Feature park: Ngari Capes Marine Park', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 2012–13).

ABORIGINAL HERITAGE

Some 14 language groups are known today as Noongar, and two of these have their tribal territory in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste area. These are the Wardandi people, located between Bunbury and Cape Leeuwin, and the Pibbelmen people, who occupy the lower Blackwood River. Traditionally, Noongar people migrated seasonally between these coastal areas and their hinterlands to use various resources. Most activity was, and still is, near fresh water sources, which were used for camping, hunting, foraging and fishing.

More than 1130 artefacts including several stone and bone relics, animal remains and engraved stone plaques have been found at Devil's Lair, providing a valuable record of Noongar life in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste region. Artefacts found at the site indicate the first human occupation in the area to be as early as 50,000 years ago, making it one of the oldest and most reliably dated occupation sites in Australia.

Aboriginal people are the primary source of information on the value and

conservation of their heritage. Engagement and collaboration with Noongar people is an important part of managing the Leeuwin-Naturaliste capes area.

Taking care of the south-west corner is everyone's responsibility. With so many visitors coming to the region to enjoy its stunning beaches, awe-inspiring forests and nature-based tourism and recreation opportunities, it is critical the area is managed to ensure the area's uses and natural values are enjoyed for many generations.



Joanna Moore is a freelance writer and editor. Born and raised in WA's beautiful south-west corner, she relishes the opportunity to write about this special place. She can be contacted on 0438 557 688 or by email (jo.theimprovingpen@gmail.com).

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