



Access for all

Western Australians and our visitors are spoilt for choice when it comes to enjoying beautiful, remote and fascinating places. But for the 20 per cent of Australians who have a disability, and their carers, a visit to the 'great outdoors' has not always been possible or practicable. Fortunately this is changing.

by Wayne Schmidt, Nathan Greenhill and Tracy Churchill



When it comes to experiencing the great outdoors, Western Australians and our visitors are among the luckiest in the world. Whether it's a casual family picnic or weekend camping trip with friends, an extended hike or mountain bike ride lasting a few hours to several weeks, fishing or surfing along a pristine beach, exploring remote outback tracks by four-wheel drive or participating in a myriad of other activities, we have it all. And along with interstate and overseas visitors, Western Australians are making good use of these areas. During 2014–15, more than 18 million visits were recorded to WA's national parks, marine parks, State forests and other reserves.

Parks and Wildlife has the important and challenging responsibility of protecting and conserving 28 million hectares of WA's natural environment and the diverse range of native animals and plants that occur there, while providing sustainable opportunities for people to access and enjoy these areas. It does this by providing a range of high quality, nature-based recreation and tourism opportunities and experiences, that encourage people to get out and enjoy nature, cater for them while they are there and are compatible with conservation and sustainable land management objectives. It strives to do this in a way that provides equitable access to everyone, including people with disabilities and the aged.

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Main Bluff Knoll at Stirling Range National Park is one of many upgraded sites that now have facilities that cater to all people.

*Photo – Marie Lochman/Lochman
Transparencies*

Inset People of all ages and abilities can enjoy sections of the Cape to Cape Track.
Photo – Friends of the Cape to Cape Track



“Universal access is in part based on the fundamental principles of equal opportunity and equity and is underpinned by the basic Australian philosophy of ensuring a ‘fair go’ for everyone.”

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS

According to current figures, about 20 per cent or one in five Australians identify themselves as having some form of disability, which vary significantly in type and severity. For some people their disability is caused by sensory, cognitive and intellectual impairments, while others cause physical limitations. There are also many Australians who suffer from chronic illnesses such as arthritis or emphysema, and others who are temporarily incapacitated as a result of injuries and surgery. As human lifespans extend, the amount of disability experienced in our community will almost certainly increase.

So it is not surprising that the needs and expectations of people with disabilities is an issue of increasing national importance. Likewise existing Commonwealth and State legislation makes it unlawful to discriminate against people with a disability and these laws encompass the right to access and use public services. Fortunately, there is now wide recognition and acceptance within the community that people with disabilities deserve to have access to the same services and facilities as able-bodied people. This includes access to and enjoyment of WA's extraordinary natural areas. And this does not just

provide benefits to the individuals who have a disability, but their families, friends and carers who might otherwise miss out on experiences and opportunities too.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS AND BARRIER-FREE DESIGN

Outdoor recreation planners and managers who work in natural areas have a dual responsibility. On one hand, they seek to provide a range of recreational opportunities and experiences for a diverse range of users. At the same time, they must ensure the protection and proper management of those very same natural areas that attract visitors in the first place. Successfully achieving these potentially conflicting objectives is a challenge.

Parks and Wildlife's *Disability Access and Inclusion Plan* sets out the framework to ensure that everyone in the community can access, use and enjoy mainstream facilities, services and programs. This is where the philosophy of 'access for all' or 'universal access' as it is sometimes termed fits in.

Universal access is in part based on the fundamental principles of equal opportunity and equity and is underpinned by the basic Australian philosophy of ensuring a 'fair go' for everyone. That is, all members of the community, irrespective

Above Visitors to Nambung National Park can explore the Pinnacles on universally accessible paths.

Photo – Parks and Wildlife

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of their age or ability, deserve to be treated equally and should be able to access and enjoy public services and facilities, which most of us take for granted.

Effective universal access is about designing 'barrier-free' places and spaces for the people who are going to use them. This can best be achieved by identifying potential access obstacles during planning and employing innovative or creative solutions to eliminate or minimise these in a way that is appropriate to the site, the environment and the community's expectations.

Although the concept of universal access is not new, it is only in recent decades that the process of providing equitable access has become mainstream in the planning, design and development of community facilities and services. While there is still some way to go, considerable



Did you know?

Parks and Wildlife offers concession entry fees to people who hold a Seniors' Card, Age Pension, Disability Support, Disability Support (Blind), Carer Payment, Carer Allowance, Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), or a Companion Card. Accompanying companions/carers of a Companion Card holder are not required to pay entry fees. And Parks and Wildlife will consider waiving entry fees for organised outings for groups of people with disabilities and aged and infirm members, and education and study groups accompanied by their carers. Contact us if you would like to apply for a fee waiver. Visit parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au for more information or call (08) 9219 9000.



Above left Brenda Welsh enjoyed the Tree Top Walk with her seeing-eye dog.

Above Cape to Cape Track is suited to users of all ages and abilities.
Photos – Parks and Wildlife

progress has been made to create more accessible environments throughout the State.

EXISTING BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING ACCESS FOR ALL

There are a range of 'barriers' to achieving more accessible environments and creating facilities and services that are accessible to all. Arguably the biggest hurdle in the past has been a general lack of awareness about the specific access needs of people with disabilities and the aged, and an understanding of how these can be met through the application of universal access design principles. This issue is being addressed through legislation and standards, and through advertising and training programs aimed at increasing public awareness.

Another significant barrier is the nature of the physical environments in which we live, work and recreate. Planning and designing universally accessible facilities and services is difficult enough in our cities, suburbs and other built-up areas. However, in outdoor environments and natural settings such as those managed by Parks and Wildlife, the physical barriers frequently encountered are significantly greater. This is largely due to the inherent characteristics of

the natural environment and the fact that many of the most attractive and popular outdoor recreation settings are located in rugged landscapes with significant physical contrasts to urban environments. The design and development of universally accessible facilities and services in heavily wooded areas, steep river valleys, deeply incised gorges, rocky headlands, undulating dunes and beaches for example can be very challenging indeed.

In addition, building codes and Australian standards that guide the development of accessible buildings and facilities are most relevant for urban settings and are not particularly appropriate for rugged natural settings. Outdoor recreation planners and natural area managers are faced with the conundrum of how far they should go to create accessible facilities while maintaining the integrity of the experience that has attracted people in the first place. Developing accessible facilities often requires significant alterations to the landscape, and the provision of roads, car parking, trails, toilets and other accessible facilities could fundamentally impact the conservation values in remote locations.

One approach to overcoming this dilemma is to plan and manage for a

range of experiences and access levels on a continuum from highly developed and easily accessible, to remote areas with no assisted access and visitor facilities. Parks and Wildlife's recreation planners and land managers weigh up the need for accessibility against the protection of the area and employ the approach that facilitated access should be avoided where it will fundamentally alter the area's conservation values or the nature of the experience.

CASE IN POINT

While all this is a challenge, there have been a number of wonderful success stories. The Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk near Walpole is a great example of how innovative design can deliver user-friendly and accessible facilities that are environmentally sustainable.

Looking for somewhere to go?

Here are some access for all attractions



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Walpole-Nornalup National Park – The facilities at the world-class Tree Top Walk facility are universally accessible and wheelchair hire is available.

Nambung National Park – View the Pinnacles Desert from the wheelchair-accessible path and soak up the information provided at the universally accessible Pinnacles Desert Discovery Centre.

Yanchep National Park – Access the gardens and barbecue facilities on a number of wheelchair and pram-friendly paths, journey around Loch McNess or through the koala viewing facility.

Bluff Knoll, Stirling Range National Park – Witness the scale of Bluff Knoll from the lookouts and picnic facilities located adjacent to the car park and lookout over the spectacular topography of the Stirling Ranges.

Karijini National Park – Soak in the cultural heritage and interpretation of the Karijini Visitor Centre or view the amazing folded geology and pools of Hamersley Gorge from the wheelchair-accessible lookout.

Cape Range National Park – Stay awhile in this beautiful park and camp beside the Ningaloo Marine Park at Kurradjong in assisted access camp sites with accessible toilets.

Monkey Mia Conservation Park – View the dolphins at feeding time from the wheelchair-accessible deck or roam the interpretation centre at Monkey Mia.

Fitzgerald River National Park – Visit many of the new recreation sites in the east of the park including the sculptures at Barrens Beach and the spectacular views from the Cave Point lookout while staying in the accessible Four Mile campground, or look out for whales from the shelters and viewing areas at Point Ann.

Mount Frankland National Park – Cast your eyes across the vast expanse of Mount Frankland National Park from the Wilderness View lookout or have a picnic in the wheelchair-accessible shelters.

Camping – Accessible camp sites, toilets and camp shelters have been constructed at Logue Brook, Conto Field, Osprey Bay, Nanga Mill and Credo campgrounds as part of the \$21 million *Parks for People* initiative, giving people with disabilities and their families a range of camping options.

There are also plans in place for campgrounds to include designated accessible camp sites and facilities such as toilets, camp shelters and trails at Shannon, Wellington, Cape Le Grand and Leeuwin-Naturaliste national parks and a day-use site at Lane Poole Reserve. And plans are ongoing for improved visitor access at Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse and in Kalbarri National Park. Parks and Wildlife is also providing assistance to tourism contractors at Wharnclyffe Mill and Wellington Forest Cottages to improve or provide for universal access within their lease areas.

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1 Experience the koala viewing facility at Yanchep National Park.

Photo – Parks and Wildlife

2 The Pinnacles, Nambung National Park.

Photo – Tiffany Taylor

3 Osprey Bay, Cape Range National Park.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/Parks and Wildlife

4 Fitzgerald River National Park.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

5 Bluff Knoll, Stirling Range National Park.

Photo – Tourism WA



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“... she was particularly appreciative of the experience, having been able to enjoy it in the same way as any visitor who does not use a wheelchair.”



Top Samantha Jenkinson and her son Jared Geddes on the Tree Top Walk.
Photo – Michael Geddes

Above Clive, Sally and Tracey Wright-Smith with campground host volunteers Barry and Jeanette Ewers with ranger Erin David and Tracey’s assistance dog Molly at Windjana Gorge National Park.
Photo – Courtesy of Clive Wright-Smith

Top right Lookouts help everyone enjoy Deep Reach Pool.
Photo – Scott Godley/Parks and Wildlife

Landscape architects and forest managers of the then Department of Conservation and Land Management worked with architects and structural engineers in designing and constructing a world-class visitor experience in a very challenging and sensitive setting. The resulting development received a number of state, national and international awards as well as the Disability Services Commission’s top honour in their 1999 Count Me In Awards.

For disability advocate Samantha Jenkinson the Tree Top Walk was a quality experience. As Samantha and her family reached the highest platform of the walk 40m above the ground, she said she was struck by the beauty of her surroundings, and a wonderful feeling of space among the treetops. Samantha’s comments echo those of almost everyone who visits the Tree Top Walk, yet she was particularly appreciative of the experience, having been able to enjoy it in the same way as any visitor who does not use a wheelchair.

Conversely, when the Bluff Knoll trail in Stirling Range National Park was upgraded,

it was deemed inappropriate to provide access for all to the summit. The trail to the top is very steep and challenging, even for people who have few physical limitations. Providing access for everyone, assuming it was even possible, would have required a huge amount of infrastructure at an enormous cost and would have forever altered the experience of the trail for all visitors. Instead, defined parking areas, accessible paths to viewing decks, toilets and other facilities were installed at the day-use area so those unable to make the very challenging trek to the top could still see and experience the landscape and seek the best view of Bluff Knoll possible.

Other examples of recreation site redevelopments where Parks and Wildlife has incorporated universal access into the planning and construction include the Fitzgerald River National Park Improvement Project, Pinnacles Desert Discovery Centre and Pinnacles Walk, a section of the Cape to Cape Track from Cape Naturaliste to Sugarloaf Rock, Hamersley Gorge in the remote Karijini National Park and an



accessible campground at the Perth Hills Centre. These sites provide impressive facilities and experiences for all visitors in a variety of landscapes.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

The impetus of Parks and Wildlife and its predecessors to improve accessibility to WA's parks and reserves can be partly attributed to the partnerships it has formed with organisations whose primary role is to serve the needs of people with disabilities and the aged. These include the Disability Services Commission's Community Access and Information Branch, ACROD and the Independent Living Centre. Their expertise, advice and support have proven invaluable in identifying and eliminating access barriers as well as improving staff awareness about the nature and extent of disability in the community through in-service training programs. On occasion, the department has also engaged the services

of various specialists such as occupational therapists who are skilled in technical planning and design matters and who regularly assist with the needs of the elderly and people with disabilities.

The department has actively supported the Disability Services Commission's 'You're Welcome' WA Access Initiative since its inception nearly a decade ago. This program aims to assist people with disabilities to access community life by encouraging businesses, State agencies, local government authorities and community organisations to make their services and facilities more accessible and providing detailed and accurate information about the accessibility of various facilities and services across the State, through its website (www.accesswa.com.au). For its part, Parks and Wildlife staff and volunteers have completed detailed access assessments of several hundred of its

Above left The Natural Bridge lookout in Kalbarri National Park offers views across the cliffs.

Above The Perth Hills Discovery Centre provides a range of camping opportunities. *Photos – Parks and Wildlife*

nature-based recreation and tourism sites and facilities (from entry stations, parking areas, scenic lookouts, trails, campgrounds and picnic areas to visitor information and interpretive facilities) for inclusion on the website. Information such as the type and firmness of surfaces, the availability of accessible parking, the gradients of walkways and ramps, the width of doorways and the internal dimensions and manoeuvrability within toilet facilities have been recorded along with a comprehensive photographic record.

LESSONS LEARNT

The implementation of the department's access for all principles and the planning and design of universally accessible recreation areas and facilities has not been without its challenges. Eliminating access barriers requires careful thought and informed planning coupled

"... there's little point in spending tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars providing universally accessible facilities if visitors are unable to access these because of other access barriers not considered in the planning process."



Above Families with prams enjoy benefits from access for all facilities.
Photo – Parks and Wildlife

Above right Jamie Dunross.
Photo – West Australian Newspapers Limited

Access facilitates life change

For Paralympian Jamie Dunross, what started as a ‘trip down south’ became a life-changing move made possible by accessibility in WA’s national parks.

Jamie, who has been in a wheelchair since being injured in a mining accident in 1988, visited Mandalay Beach in D’Entrecasteaux National Park and was delighted to find it was accessible with assistance.

“I’ve travelled all over the world and had never seen anything like this – in fact it was more accessible in the national park than it was in town,” he said.

“Parks and Wildlife has got it really right and it’s not just at one spot as a token gesture, but across the board, within reason.”

“And this doesn’t just benefit people with access issues but also mums with prams who can come to these areas, use the paths and get a pram into the toilets where they can change their babies.

“People with scooters and walking aids can also use these facilities.”

Based on his experiences in the area, Jamie moved to north Walpole where he fully immersed himself in the local community and is credited for leading the reinvigoration of the yacht club which operates out of Walpole-Nornalup Marine Park.

“The local yacht club was looking to change its name or be shut down completely, but I asked them to hold off until I moved down,” he said.

“The yacht club had 50 years of history and is set in one of the most idyllic locations in the world; there are not many places where you have big trees coming into the water.”

A massive community collaboration to fix up the clubhouse revitalised the sport in the area, and the ‘Walpole in the Trees’ regatta has now become the largest regatta outside the metropolitan area.

“This event engages people from across Australia of all ages – from kids paddling in the water to the 80-year-olds who love the opportunity to get their boats out,” Jamie said.



with creativity; in many cases recreation designers and land managers have been required to come up with innovative solutions that are not specified in manuals or standards.

They have found immense value in consulting widely and seeking advice from intended users early in the process to gauge the needs and expectations of the community.

They have also found that many additional costs incurred to provide increased access can be avoided through careful planning and design of appropriate infrastructure. They also recognise the importance of identifying and eliminating all access barriers within a recreation site, however minor they might seem, as there’s little point in spending tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars providing

universally accessible facilities if visitors are unable to access these because of other access barriers not considered in the planning process.

A CLEAR PATH TO THE FUTURE

People frequently interpret the word ‘access’ as only referring to physical access, but this is just one aspect of improving access to facilities and services for everyone in the community. While there have been many significant physical access improvements across the conservation estate that have benefitted all users, we have yet to comprehensively address the needs of people with sensory, cognitive or other disabilities. This, combined with a continued commitment to identify, minimise and eliminate the physical and social barriers which have

in the past prevented some members of our community from experiencing and enjoying the ‘best of the west’ will result in a more accessible park system, one that we can all be proud of.

Wayne Schmidt worked for the former departments of CALM and DEC and, since retiring, has assisted department staff carrying out disability access assessments of recreation sites and visitor facilities.

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