

Highlighting heritage:

Riverpark trail celebrates Australia's Sikh history

A fascinating new interpretive trail on the Swan Canning Riverpark pays homage to a site used by the Australian Sikh community and shares stories not widely known about the extraordinary contributions Sikhs have made to Australia in the past two centuries.

by Ben Ansell and Sophie Henderson



Visitors have long been drawn to Adenia Park, Riverton, also known as Bicentennial Park, in Canning River Regional Park for walks, picnics and bike rides. It is also popular among birdwatchers, who venture there to enjoy the abundance of bird species that forage and nest in the vegetation that fringes the Canning River. It is also frequented by those on kayaks and canoes who explore the river. But, for Australian Sikhs, the area holds immense cultural heritage and historical value. And a new trail is providing visitors with a unique opportunity to learn about an important slice of Australian history that has not been widely told.

RICH HISTORY

The Australian Sikh Heritage Trail celebrates the remarkable story of Australian Sikhs over the past two centuries, and their contribution to Australia's heritage. Situated at Adenia Park, the exact site where Sikhs were cremated legally in Western Australia for the first time in the 1930s, the trail shares stories of how Sikhs shaped the present cultural and social landscape of Australia. From the mid-1800s, Sikhs from the Punjab region of India (the 'land of five rivers' – an area that spans eastern Pakistan and north-western India) made their way to WA – many of them as cameleers. Traditionally, horses and sometimes donkeys and bullocks were used by explorers and prospectors on expeditions into Australia's interior. However, because of Australia's harsh arid environment, horses often required regular water and large stocks of feed, making them a less than ideal mode of transport across the vast area of land they were required to travel. Horses were also easily exhausted by the tough and often sandy ground. So, it was thanks to camels and the cameleers (many of whom were from Punjab), and other cameleers from South Asia, who travelled to the centre of Australia, that the region was opened up to trade and transport between the Australian colonies. Sikhs living in Australia during the late 1800s and early



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Main Adenia Park, Canning River Regional Park holds cultural significance to the Australian Sikh and Nyoongar communities.

Photo – Marie Lochman

Inset The Australian Sikh Heritage Trail celebrates 180 years of Sikh culture.

Above Interpretive panels share the history and culture of Sikh and Nyoongar people.

Photos – Bobby Sandhu/Be Still Studios

1900s also made a living as businessmen, hawkers, shopkeepers, farmers, wrestlers and soldiers.

Some early pioneer Sikhs who had previously been cameleers or hawkers became successful businessman and purchased stores, while others became security guards or purchased farms. According to the Australian Sikh Heritage Association, during the early period of the State's colonisation, almost every WA country town was visited by a Sikh

hawker several times a year. During the Great Depression, these towns could not have survived without the essentials that were being provided by these hawkers to country households – often on credit.

ANZAC LEGACY

The trail also pays respect to and acknowledges the contributions made by Sikh Anzacs. When war broke out in 1914, a number of Sikhs enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force. According to the Australian Sikh Heritage Association, at least 19 Sikhs enlisted in the Australia Imperial Force and the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEAF) and about 1.2 million people volunteered to fight for the British Indian Army in WWI – making them the largest volunteer army in the war. In World War I and World War II, 83,005 Sikhs were killed and 109,045 were wounded fighting for the Allied forces.

One of the stories illustrated in the signage at the Australian Sikh Heritage Trail is that of Manmohan Singh, who



joined the Indian Air Force Volunteer Reserve as a pilot officer at the outbreak of World War II in 1939. He was selected as the leader of an Indian Air Force batch of pilots sent to England for training and active duty. As the oldest of the group, he was affectionately known as 'Chacha ji' (Punjabi for uncle). Manmohan Singh was given command of a Sunderland flying boat with the RAF Coastal Command, hunting submarines during the battle for the Atlantic.

On the morning of 3 March 1942, a Japanese air attack destroyed 15 flying boats on the water in Broome Harbour, killing 88 people. Manmohan Singh was in

a Catalina at the time the attack occurred. He is thought to have survived the shelling and resulting explosion but, as he could not swim, he drowned in the ocean. Manmohan Singh died far away from his homeland fighting for the freedom of Britain and the world. Sikhs continue to serve proudly in the Australian Defence Force today.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ADENIA PARK

Adenia Park has long been associated with the religious ceremonies of the Sikh community, and was the location where cremations first legally took place in WA

Discover more about the Australian Sikh Heritage Trail

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.

Above Australian Sikhs came from the Punjab region of India.

Photo – Bobby Sandhu/Be Still Studios

Left Cremations were first legally carried out at Adenia Park.

Source – The Mirror newspaper, 30 June 1934. From the National Library of Australia.

after the Sikh community campaigned for cremation to be legalised. The funeral rites of the Sikh religion require cremation, however, in the Swan River Colony's first 100 years, cremation was not permitted by law. Cremations took place nonetheless and newspapers reported cremations in Claremont in 1897, Manjimup in 1901 and Kalgoorlie in 1910. Sikhs living in WA petitioned the State Government for decades to legalise the practice and the law was changed with the passing of the *Cremation Act 1929*.



Above Nihal Singh of Manjimup on his wagon with his dog.
Source – State Library of Western Australia

Above right Hawker Veer Singh from Wandering.
Photo – Courtesy of the Dowsett Family



In Sikhi, a religion that originated in the Punjab region, the funeral rites are called Unttim Sunskaar (final act). A wooden pyre is erected for the cremation while passages of Sikh Holy Scripture are recited. After the ceremony, the remaining ashes are scattered in nearby flowing water. The swamp sheoak (*Casuarina obesa*), which is also known as Kulli in Nyoongar, is commonly found around the Canning River Regional Park. According to stories, the local sheoak was used for wooden cremation pyres in the Sikh cremation ceremonies at Adenia Park.

Harjit Singh from the Australian Sikh Heritage Association spoke at the official opening of the Australian Sikh Heritage Trail and summed up the significance of the trail for the Sikh community, and the broader Australian community, as a celebration of multiculturalism.

“Close to 100 years ago, the WA Government honoured the ‘other’ when it was not required and was downright

unpopular to do so due to the prevailing White Australia Policy at that time,” he said.

“The WA Government acknowledged the religious needs of a minority and changed a law to make cremations legal.

“Today, the Australian Sikh Heritage Trail pays that gesture of goodwill forward by starting the trail by honouring those that came before us all – the Nyoongar people and the natural landscape of this beautiful land.

“It is hoped that visitors will embrace the messages shared on the trail and continue paying goodwill forward and commit to honour the ‘other’, in order to spread kindness and strengthen tolerance in our communities.”

WORKING TOGETHER

The Australian Sikh Heritage Trail project was achieved through a collaboration between DBCA, the City of Canning, the Australian Sikh Heritage Association, the Sikh Association of WA and Sikh Gurdwara Perth.

A Lotterywest grant secured by the City of Canning and the Australian

Sikh Heritage Association provided the initial impetus to kick-off early consultation with DBCA to help establish the framework for what became a three-year project. DBCA was keen to be involved in the project to celebrate the strong community connection that exists with the rivers, and, specifically, to acknowledge the strong link the Western Australian Sikh community has with Adenia Park.

A reference group worked together to develop design concepts, and research and uncover the remarkable story of Australian Sikhs, building on research carried out since 2010 by the Australian Sikh Heritage Association. Information was gathered through searching libraries, state records and tracking down information in private collections, as well as interviewing community members who could help piece together the story. Along the way friendships were made and stockpiles of individual stories and photographs were collected, indicating what a massive impact Sikhs have had on the Australian story.

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WHAT'S IN A NODE?

The implementation of the Australian Sikh Heritage Trail has seen the development of four new interpretation facilities (or nodes) and a 250-metre-long concrete path with a number of interpretive elements. In designing the trail, DBCA worked closely with the City of Canning and the Australian Sikh Heritage Association to ensure the project connected to Australian Sikh cultural heritage values and was implemented in a culturally sensitive way. In addition, the project was designed for longevity so the infrastructure could be maintained in the long term.

The interpretation draws on striking images and storytelling across six key themes: cameleers, hawkers, entrepreneurs, Anzacs, wrestlers and cremations. Each of the nodes also incorporates a quote in Gurmukhi (Sikh script). There is also information relevant to Whadjuk Nyoongar culture, including an acknowledgment of Country, and information about the Riverpark's natural values. There are also plans to have stories from the Australian Sikh community recorded for visitors to listen to.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The Australian Sikh Heritage Trail forms part of the broader Swan Canning Riverpark Trail network, connecting to other paths and interpretation facilities in the Riverpark – known as River Journeys, which enrich visitor experiences and

connection to the Riverpark's natural and cultural heritage.

The Swan Canning Riverpark Trail network has been in the making for a number of years, with extensive planning and liaison to develop a draft Riverpark Trail Masterplan and the Marli Riverpark Interpretation Plan, named after the Nyoongar word for 'black swan'. These documents have identified trail guides and key areas for interpretation along the Riverpark. An important part of developing the Marli Riverpark Interpretation Plan, was to establish a Nyoongar Advisory Panel to provide advice on how to integrate cultural heritage information and guide how messages about Whadjuk Nyoongar cultural heritage values of the rivers should be told.

The Riverpark Trail vision is to create a continuous recreation trail network through the Swan Canning Riverpark, from Fremantle to Guildford, on both the northern and southern shores of the Swan and Canning rivers. The network of trails will be designed to improve visitors' connectivity to the rivers and enhance their understanding and enjoyment of the Riverpark. The trail will include a range of recreation options, including short circuits and long distance walking and cycling opportunities, and improved access to the river edge. Along the Riverpark Trail, there will be interpretation nodes at key visitor locations to communicate the Riverpark's natural and cultural values. It is hoped that Adenia Park will attract visitors, particularly from India, interstate

and the wider community, and projects such as the Australian Sikh Heritage Trail will help connect visitors to parks, create a sense of shared ownership and improve the experiences of those who visit.

Above left The trail honours the Nyoongar and Sikh heritage of the area.

Photo – Marie Lochman

Above The trail caters to walkers and other users.

Photo – Bobby Sandhu/Be Still Studios

Below Canning River Regional Park provides a haven for waterbirds and other animals.

Photo – Marie Lochman



Sophie Henderson is a DBCA media relations officer. She can be contacted on (08) 9219 9918 or by email (sophie.henderson@dbca.wa.gov.au).

Ben Ansell is a DBCA Recreation and Trails project officer. He can be contacted on (08) 9442 0343 or by email (ben.ansell@dbca.wa.gov.au).

For more information about the Australian Sikh Heritage Trail visit www.australiansikhheritage.com