





Embracing biophilia

Prescribing nature in a pandemic

As the world was urged to remain indoors to control the spread of a deadly virus, our desire to be outdoors grew with intensity. Forced into lockdown, humankind's innate biological connection with nature brought relief in the height of a global pandemic.

by Lauren Cabrera

When the threat of COVID-19, a respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus, reached Australian shores in early 2020 we were told to keep our distance from each other, stay inside and only venture out for essential activities like groceries, medical treatment and exercise.

After international, interstate and eventually regional boundaries closed, campsite bookings at Parks and Wildlife Service campgrounds were suspended and key attractions, facilities and tours with high visitor numbers were also closed.

Easter holidays came and went, with beloved campgrounds remaining uncharacteristically quiet and popular Rottnest Island kept those returning from interstate and overseas safe in quarantine before returning home to their loved ones.

Among the stress and uncertainty, national and regional parks, reserves and State forests remained open to be used to help maintain physical and mental health.

As the world came to a standstill, the rhythms of nature continued. The sun



still rose and set, and plants and animals maintained their cycles of growth and decay as the quiet predictability and simplicity of nature soothed our worries and calmed our minds.

GETTING OUT

Being forced to remain isolated indoors gave rise to a quantifiable yearning to be outdoors and permission to go outside for exercise became a moment of optimism, escapism and a much-needed mental health break.

A simple walk became an adventure for the whole family and soon local, regional and national parks were filled with returning visitors and eager new explorers.

Whether alone or abiding by the strict two-person minimum, Western

Australians took to the trails and popular parks reached capacity.

John Forrest National Park saw a 43.4 per cent increase in visitation between March and June compared with the previous year as people enjoyed Eagle View Walk Trail and the shorter Glen Brook Trail. The carpark regularly reached capacity and visitors pushed the limits of the 1.5-metre social distancing guidelines through the Old Swan View Tunnel.

While the shelters along the Bibbulmun Track were temporarily closed, walkers spent the day completing shorter sections of the track such as the popular Hills Forest to Golden View and South Ledge or took on the challenge of Mount Vincent to Mount Cuthbert. For those staying at home, the Bibbulmun

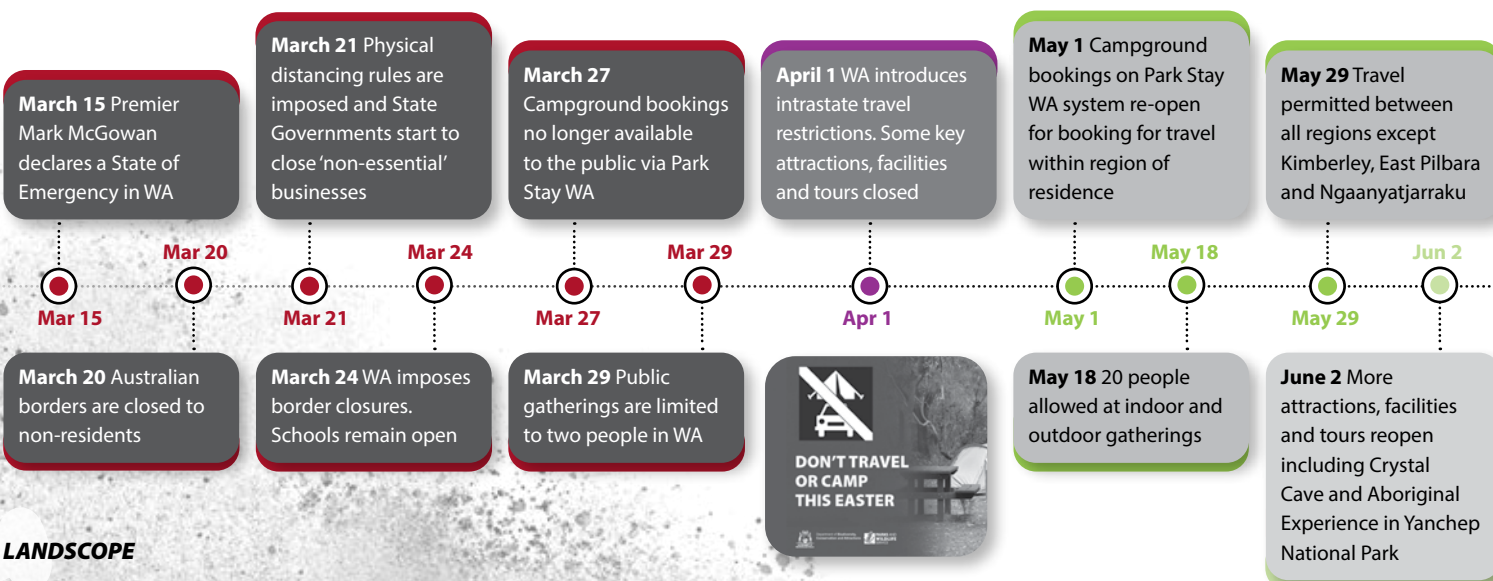
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Main People flocked to Kings Park as restrictions eased.

Photo – Keane Bourke/ABC

Above Mount Vincent Bibbulmun Track.

Photo – Rory Cabrera





Thank you

In Yanchep National Park, a travelling British couple found sanctuary among the koalas after being stranded in the national park due to the restrictions. The couple were so grateful to the Parks and Wildlife Service staff who helped them, they expressed their thanks in a card saying "Yanchep has become a home to us – a very special place we will never forget. It's probably a good thing our flight isn't cancelled or else we'd never leave!"

Inset Jade and Zico.
Photo – Jade Evans



Track Foundation used their social media presence to take followers on 'virtual hikes' through some of the popular sections of the track.

ON YOUR BIKE

With gyms closed and fewer people on the roads, cycling had an unprecedented surge in popularity, with bicycle shops across the State reporting to be 'busier than Christmas'.

Coming out of summer, cyclists were keen to get riding and many were seen along the banks of the Swan and Canning rivers and enjoying shorter day rides in national and regional parks within regional boundaries.

The topography and landscape of the Collie region in the south-west of

WA makes the area a big drawcard for mountain bikers. Although there were fewer visitors travelling through the town on the Munda Biddi Trail, local trails became popular as word spread of progress of the new Collie Adventure Trail network (see 'Bush Telegraph' page 6).

As soon as regional boundaries were lifted, local bike shops were once again providing advice for those planning an end-to-end of the Munda Biddi Trail and cyclists hit the trails.

EXPLORING THE BACKYARD

After a long, hot summer Exmouth is usually bursting with tourists hoping to swim with whale sharks or snorkel in the waters of the Ningaloo Reef. Instead, the town and the marine park were



Above left Murray Bridge Munda Biddi Trail.
Photo – Judy Dunlop

Above Grace (age 6) enjoying John Forrest National Park.
Photo – Stuart Harrison

Below Shannon National Park.
Photo – Cliff Winfield

June 5 All regional boundary restrictions lifted

Continued vigilance of good hygiene and physical distancing

Jun 27

Jun 5

June 27 Gathering limits removed. All events permitted. Removal of restrictions at restaurants, pubs and gyms



While using this toilet please remember to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or use your inner elbow.



Please disinfect your hands with hand sanitiser when finished using toilet.

*Current situation at time of publication



“... they could not recall the last time they stood alone on the beach at Turquoise Bay over an Easter long weekend.”



deserted. While the tourists stayed away, the locals indulged in the peace of the empty waves at popular surfing spots like Wobiri Beach and Dunes, and as restrictions eased prior to intrastate boundaries being lifted, they enjoyed the emptiness of their favourite camping spots during the best weather of the year. Locals exclaimed they could not recall the last time they stood alone on the beach at Turquoise Bay over an Easter long weekend.

The Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk near Walpole remained eerily quiet at what is usually the busiest time of year and instead people spread out on the beaches of D'Entrecasteaux National Park

as soon as the salmon started to run, or day-tripped to Parry Beach in William Bay National Park.

At the mouth of the Murchison River in the State's Midwest, locals walked the Gabba Gabba Yinna and Mushroom Rock trails and watched from Kalbarri National Park's spectacular coastal cliffs as the humpback whales made their way north. Visitation to the area dropped 97 per cent and residents flocked to the boardwalk between Natural Bridge and Island Rock, while Parks and Wildlife Service staff made preparations for the opening of the Kalbarri Skywalk (see 'Kaju Yotka: take a walk on the wild side' *LANDSCOPE* Autumn 2020).

FOR THE KIDS

As restrictions tightened, parents were asked to keep their children home from school and outdoor environmental education activities around the State were forced to put their excursion programs on hold and close their venues.

While screen time is ordinarily something that is closely monitored, children were able to learn online and the internet was used as a tool to encourage exploring the outdoors and learning from nature (see 'Kids and canopies cooling the planet' page 50).

Social media played an important role in environmental education as followers of Perth Zoo's Facebook page enjoyed live streams of animals and zookeepers. Kings Park developed a 'home delivery' service that posted nature-based activity packs directly to homes and Parks and Wildlife Service's popular *Nearer to Nature* program encouraged kids to explore their own backyards (see 'Kaleidoscope' page 53) and adapted environmental activities into online learning modules to fulfil curriculum requirements for secondary students.

OPENING UP

As restrictions eased and social gatherings outdoors were increased from two people to 10, a mosaic of picnic blankets carpeted the open spaces of regional parks as locals enjoyed the last of the autumn sunshine.

On 1 May, campsites were again able to be booked. The Park Stay WA campground booking system received so much traffic in the first hour of opening, the system crashed. With one booking received every four seconds, the website required an increase of 400 per cent capacity to deal with the volume of traffic.



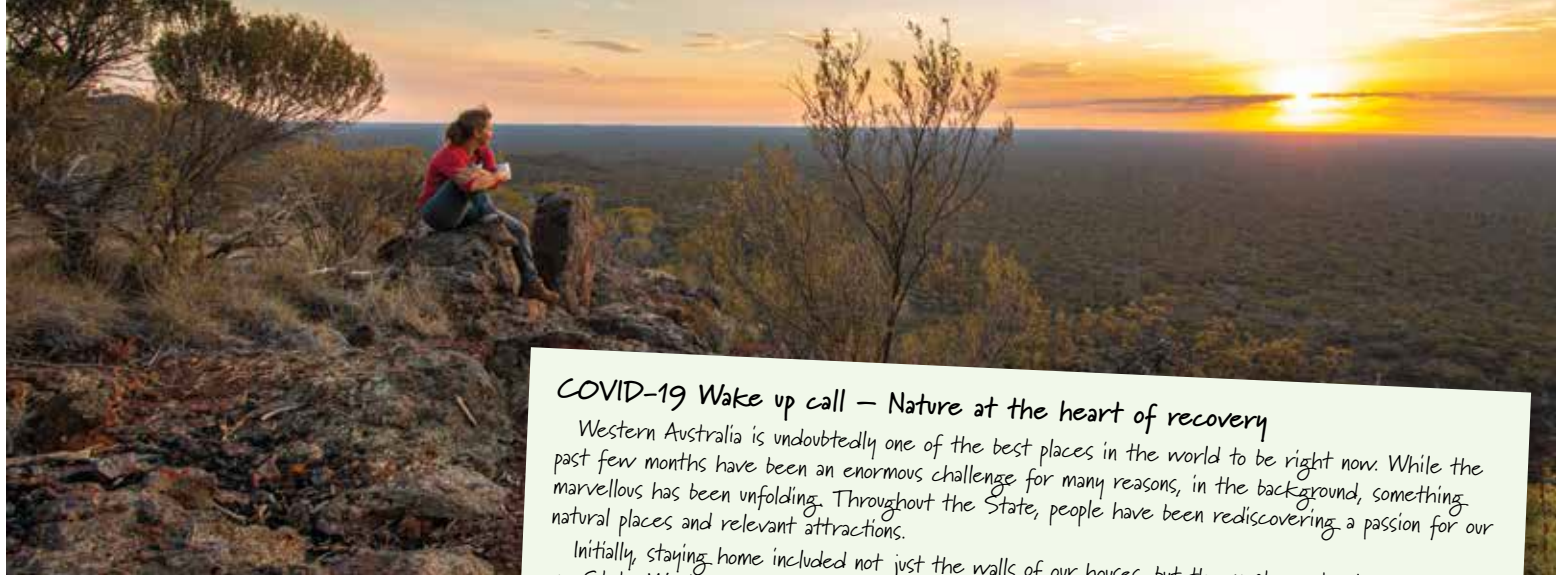
Above "It normally it looks like Bondi Beach and you are jostling to find space to spread out your towel!", Turquoise Bay, Easter 2020. Photo – Brooke Halkyard

Above right Physical distancing at Yeagarup Beach. Photo – Tim Foley

Left Perth Zoo Facebook live cam.

Below Kings Park 'home delivery' packs.





Campground bookings increased 30 per cent from the same time the previous year and people turned out in droves, booking out and immediately filling Parks and Wildlife Service campgrounds in the Perth and Peel region for the first two weekends after reopening.

As restrictions continued to ease, national and regional parks in the Perth and Peel region were packed to such an extent that some national parks were at capacity before 10am. Traffic to the Trails WA website increased by 137 per cent from the previous year with people researching regional trails and 113 per cent for people looking for mountain bike trails, quantifying our love for nature.

WHAT NOW

It is almost impossible to say that life will return to normal despite restrictions easing and borders reopening. Such an abrupt disruption to our way of life has forced us all to look at what's important to us, what we enjoy and what we need to make us happy.

Being required to remain inside our man-made confines has fanned the flames of our biophilia; that innate connection with nature and a primal urge to connect with earth and sea. Western Australia's size and proximity from the rest of the country not only provided a natural barrier that kept us safe, its unique biodiversity and natural assets also protected our wellbeing by simply being able to experience them.

Above A peaceful moment at Helena-Aurora Range Conservation Park.
Photo – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

COVID-19 Wake up call – Nature at the heart of recovery

Western Australia is undoubtedly one of the best places in the world to be right now. While the past few months have been an enormous challenge for many reasons, in the background, something marvellous has been unfolding. Throughout the State, people have been rediscovering a passion for our natural places and relevant attractions.

Initially, staying home included not just the walls of our houses, but the most spectacular backyard – our State. Western Australians are spoilt by some of the most incredible national parks and reserves in the world and for many, it's taken the current State of Emergency to remind them of that.

Regional restrictions saw people exploring and getting to know their own patches of nature. I heard so many families and individuals say they had never appreciated a daily walk so much, and I couldn't agree more. We discovered small nature reserves within our neighbourhoods, took notice of unique flora species and got excited over native animal sightings.

The discoveries didn't stop when the regional borders reopened, instead, Western Australians have embraced intrastate travel, exploring every inch of our brilliant State. From the highly anticipated new Kalbarri Skywalk in the Midwest, to the reconstructed Bluff Knoll walk trail in the South West, we've seen record visitor numbers as people challenge themselves to 'Wander out Yonder'.

The benefits of nature to our mental health and wellbeing have long since been documented, but right now, we're witnessing them first hand. The environment has been our lifeline throughout COVID-19, quite literally, a breath of fresh air.

What we have to remember, is WA's environment needs us just as much as we need it. We are nature's custodians. For many, that stewardship started at a very young age and will continue to persist for life. For others, that connection and love of parks has only recently been discovered.

The conservation of our parks is in the hands of Western Australians. By fostering and building a sense of ownership and close appreciation of our parks, we are ensuring their future.

For all of these reasons, we remain committed to creating more opportunities for people to enjoy and connect with Western Australia's national parks, reserves and forests. Last year, the McGowan Government announced a bold plan to establish five million hectares of new national and marine parks and reserves by February 2024 – increasing Western Australia's conservation estate by 20 per cent.

This is about creating a lasting, positive environmental legacy for current and future generations. So far, we are making good progress.

Already, we have created the Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park in the Midwest and added land to Murrumbidgee National Park in the Pilbara. In the future, we will see new and expanded parks, from the Kimberley in the north, across the Rangelands, through population centres in Perth and Bunbury, to our south-west forests and along our southern coastline.

When we get back to basics and explore nature at its finest, quite often we are experiencing the richness of traditional Aboriginal culture. Across the globe, people are fascinated by our history and eager to experience authentic Australia.

It's easy to take our unique and ancient landscape for granted, when we should in fact be embracing it. We're acknowledging that desire by celebrating one of the State's greatest cultural assets, with steady progress being made on a nomination to include Murrumbidgee on the World Heritage List. The listing would see Murrumbidgee's values, including its iconic rock art, recognised globally as one of the world's best.

I know many people are eager for remaining border restrictions to be lifted so they can get out and explore the rest of the country and world. But when that happens, try not to forget about the special places in our shared backyard. We are nature's custodians. We need to appreciate what we have, celebrate it and make sure we look after it for generations to come.

Words from Director General, Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, Mark Webb





Avoid the crowds at these lesser known walk trails near Perth

Yanchep National Park - Yanchep Rose Trail

60km north of Perth, 14km partial loop

Starting at the McNess House Visitor Centre, this trail meanders through the coastal plain vegetation, offering panoramic views from the sea to the scarp and passing by historic bunkers from World War II. The limestone outcrops punctuate the extensive wildflower displays in spring. Kangaroo sightings are almost a certainty in the early morning and evening.

The trail marker can be easily identified with the native Yanchep rose emblem. It passes by Cabaret Cave and then crosses Wanneroo Road to offer a circular route. The track is limestone and sand and can become heavy underfoot as summer progresses. It is best suited to winter and spring as there is little tree cover. For more information visit trails.wa.com.au/trails/yanchep-rose-trail



Ranger's tip From August to September, the Yanchep rose and the parrot bush are in full flower. Be careful when approaching the edge of the lookout and please stay on the path to preserve the unique Yanchep rose that fringes the trail.

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Above Yanchep Rose Trail.
Inset right The Spectacles.
Inset far right Cliffs of Blackwall Reach.
Photos – DBCA



Beeliar National Park

The Spectacles, Beeliar Regional Park - Aboriginal Heritage Trail

35km south of Perth, 5km loop

This trail loops around the northernmost 'big eye' wetland. The wetlands were important camping, and ceremonial areas providing food for Aboriginal people. The Medina Aboriginal Cultural Group installed interpretation panels around the trail to explain the story of traditional life as told by a Noongar elder. The prolific birdlife can be viewed from the hide and throughout the park, including wrens, honeyeaters and wattlebirds.

The Beeliar Regional Park consists of two chains of wetlands comprised of 26 lakes and numerous wetlands stretching 25km along the coast and covering an area of approximately 3400 hectares. The Spectacles are a wetland in the eastern chain comprised of two lake bodies. For more information visit trails.wa.com.au/trails/spectacles-aboriginal-heritage-trail



Ranger's tip Dogs on leads are welcome but care needs to be taken to watch for snakes which are occasionally seen on the path.



Blackwall Reach Reserve

Blackwall Reach Reserve/Point Walter - Jenna Biddi Yorga

Bicton, 2km one way

The Jenna Biddi Yorga, meaning 'women's feet walking on the path' in Whadjuk Noongar language, follows along the Kwoppa Kepa (Bicton foreshore). We invite both women and men to walk this path, however we ask all the men who do so to respectfully acknowledge Jennalup (Blackwall Reach) as a women's area in the past, and encourage the men to continue this acknowledgement into the future.

This is one of the dreaming trails traversing along the Swan and Canning rivers. This dreaming trail on the southern side of the river is the yorga biddi (women's trail) and the men's trail is found on the northern side. The sand spit (Djoondalup), connects these two trails. To the Whadjuk people Jennalup was traditionally a place for women and children and carries the story of Djunda the Charnock woman. For more information visit trails.wa.com.au/trails/jenna-biddi-yorga



Ranger's tip Audio recordings of Whadjuk Elders sharing stories about the area are available on the Geotourists app and Explore Parks website.

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