

NOT THE COLLIE YOU KNOW



Trail tourism is playing an increasingly important role in reinvigorating and reinventing towns. Collie, with its rich and proud coal mining history, continues its transition into a 'Trail Town', as the \$10 million investment to create 180km of hiking and mountain bike trails begins to take shape and investments are being made in local art.

by Rod Annear



Collie has a rich and proud history as a coal mining town and is WA's only operating coalfield. Its knockabout reputation and working town image belie the beauty and richness of the surrounding environment protected by national parks and reserves.

Things are changing in Collie. As changes to power generation and coal mining begin to kick in, Collie is reinventing itself as a trail, tourism and adventure town. This is part of a 'just transition' for the people of Collie, for jobs and for the future of the town.

Part of Collie's big transition is a \$10 million investment to develop Collie into a 'trail town' and create 180 kilometres of hiking and mountain bike trails (see Putting Collie on the map, *LANDSCOPE* Spring 2019). Since the announcement of the Collie Trails Adventure initiative in 2019, real progress has been made towards attracting mountain bikers, walkers and adventurers from across Australia and the world.

TRAIL TOWNS

To truly understand the buzz around 'trail towns', Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) project coordinator for the Collie Trail Project, Stuart Harrison, visited an established trail town in Derby, Tasmania in late 2019. He found that everyone was



Tasmania's trail town

In Derby, Tasmania, once a thriving tin mining town, the population fell from more than 3000 in the early nineteenth century to less than 200 a few years ago. Derby was a 'blink and miss it' place, then mountain biking came to town. World-class trails and a world-class landscape mixed with a can-do approach and an experienced trail builder have resulted in a now thriving town, with new businesses, new residents and families and more visitors than they can handle.



there to experience the trails and the vibe was a bit like a ski town.

"I couldn't get a meal in town and had to travel 20 minutes to the next town to wait for two hours for dinner at the pub – and that was a quiet mid-week!" said Stuart. "It was a real eye opener and confirmed our planning; just how big the impact could be with the right planning and right trails – trail users will come to visit."

The new trail networks in and around Collie are a real game changer. Thirty kilometres of trail at Arklow, 35 kilometres at Westralia and around 65 kilometres in Wellington National Park will result in the biggest mountain bike trail network in Western Australia.

Add to that the existing and improved walk trails including the Wilman Bilya trail – a five-day, four-night hike around Wellington Dam with overnight campsites.

There will also be shorter loop options that will result from the new trail construction. Part of the new walk trail includes a planned suspension bridge across the Collie River. The bridge and nearby upgraded Collie Scenic Drive provide yet another new attraction for Collie.

"What I'm really excited about is the opportunity that the new trails provide to develop a new generation who value and care for natural places," said Stuart. "Connecting kids and families to the jarrah and marri forests through trails gives us the opportunity to tell stories about why forests are important, how they work and what we can all do to protect them."

"Finding that connection is a big part of what we are doing and getting kids away from screens and out into the natural world is more important than ever. I have two young daughters who I want

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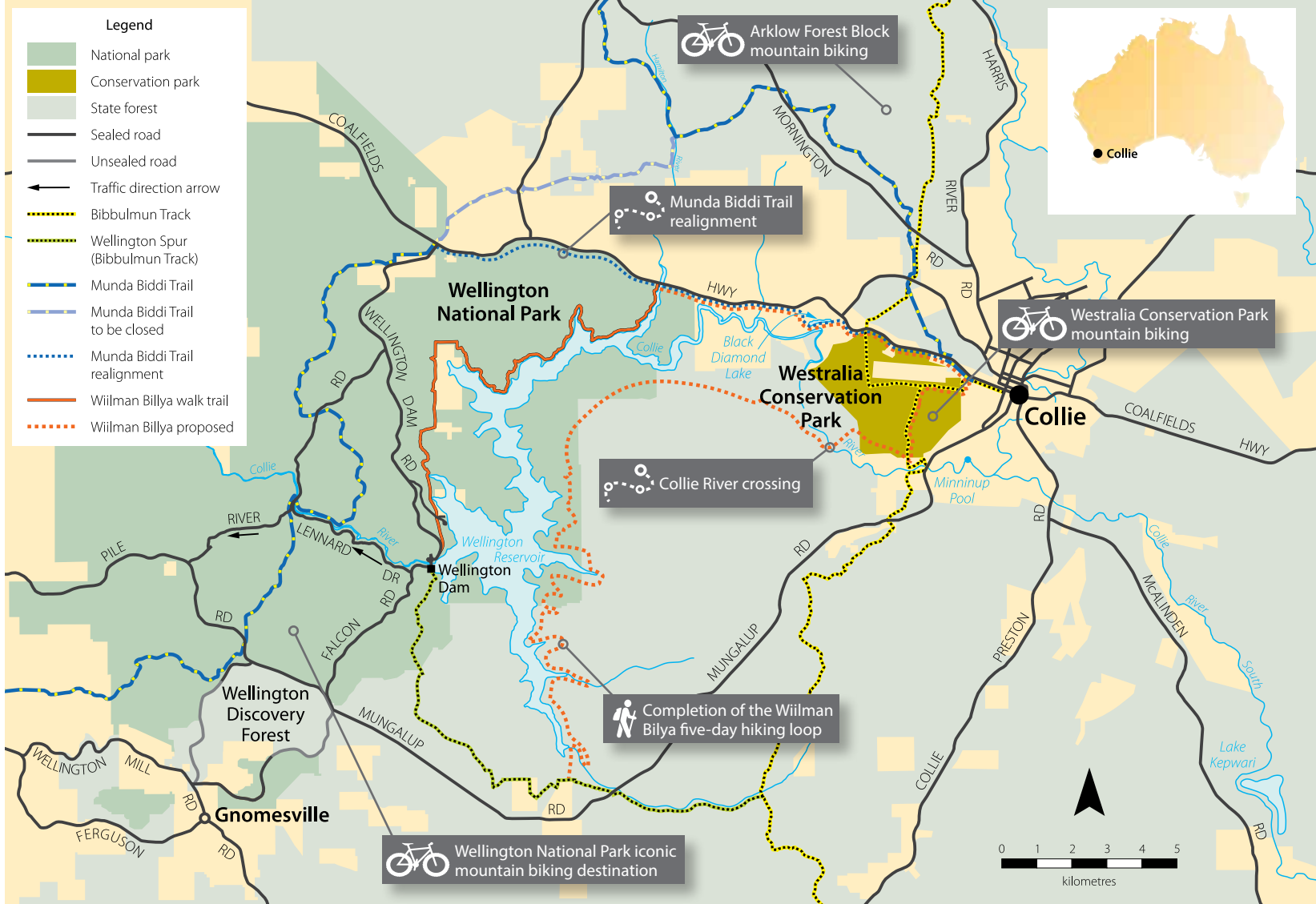
Main and inset Arklow mountain bike trails.
Photos – Frances Andrijich

Top Arklow mountain bike trails.
Photo – Tim Campbell/Common Ground Trails

Above Trail town Derby, Tasmania.
Photo – Rod Annear/DBCA

Discover more about trail building

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to learn to love the WA bush as much as I do, and I want a next generation who care and will speak up to protect it. Trails are a hook to help make that happen.”

FUN FOR ALL

The trails will also cater for riders and walkers of all ages and abilities. One of the new mountain bike trails is the Arklow Adaptive Trail (see Adventure ahead for cyclists with a disability, *LANDSCOPE* Summer 2019–20), built specifically to cater for riders on adaptive bikes.

Break the Boundary Deputy Chair Wade Jarvis says that providing opportunities to access the outdoors through well designed infrastructure for people with physical and neurological disabilities empowers people to go beyond flat surfaces, out of their comfort zone and into off-road areas which they may have thought were inaccessible (See Breaking

the boundaries, *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2020).

“It’s about empowerment, confidence and freedom – that buzz of being outdoors and in the bush should be available to everyone, and trails like the Arklow Adaptive Trail make that possible,” said Wade.

Consultants, Common Ground Trails, developed the concept plan for the trails in Wellington National Park and company owner David Wilcox says the new mountain bike trail network will provide visitors an experience like nothing else available in WA.

“The quality and number of trails will keep people in Collie for days – and keep them coming back,” said David.

“What we have seen elsewhere is that investment follows the trails. Riders and walkers want somewhere to stay, somewhere to eat and want to take



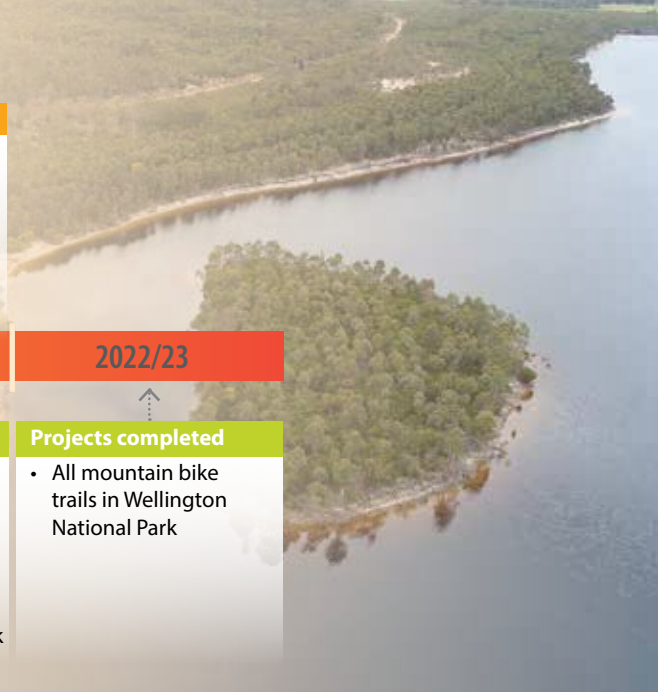
Above Arklow adaptive trail.
Photo – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

home a shirt or hat to remember their visit.

“The trail experience will be great, and I think we will see a massive change in Collie in the next few years.”

Anticipated timeline

Works	Works	Works	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mountain bike trails in Wellington National Park and Arklow forest block Wiilman Bilya walk trail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mountain bike trails in Wellington National Park and Westralia Conservation Park Collie River crossing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mountain bike trails in Wellington National Park 	
↓	↓	↓	
2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
↑	↑	↑	↑
Projects completed	Projects completed	Projects completed	Projects completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trails in Arklow Forest Block 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wiilman Bilya walk trail Some trails in Wellington National Park Collie River crossing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mountain bike trails in Westralia Conservation Park Extension to Munda Biddi Trail Some trails in Wellington National Park 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All mountain bike trails in Wellington National Park



Top Lake Kepwari.
Photo – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

Above Collie local bike shop owner Erik Mellegers.
Photo – Rod Annear/DBCA

TRANSITIONING TOWN

It's a familiar story in Australia and around the world where trail tourism is playing an increasingly important role in reinvigorating and reinventing small towns after industries have changed or left.

Collie Shire President Sarah Stanley says the changes to the town will enable the transition from coal and power generation to tourism and other new industries to soften the loss of traditional mining and power jobs.

“Collie has a great soul,” said Sarah. “People in Collie are resilient and adaptable and while the changes won't be easy, investment and planning will help the transition we are all facing. By diversifying Collie's economy, we can create new jobs and maintain our strong and vibrant community.”

Shire of Collie Director of development services, Andrew Dover says the town is ready and willing to embrace its new trails and adventure focus.

“The Shire of Collie and Council has developed and adopted a comprehensive trails strategy and are working closely with DBCA to deliver a total trail town experience for visitors new and old,” said Andrew.

“This is an exciting partnership between state and local government and the community to grow a new sustainable industry.”

Collie's makeover runs deep with some of its outstanding heritage buildings getting their original facades restored. New wayfinding signs and maps will be put in place and a business development officer is working with local businesses to get them tourism and trail ready.

CYCLING COMMUNITY

Erik Mellegers is a local bike shop owner and says that Collie has a long and proud cycling history.

“Cycling was a working man's sport,” said Erik. “It was relatively cheap and in the early days of Collie, everyone owned a bike.”

“You could ride your bike to the mine during the week and on weekends push the handlebars down and race on the road and track.”

The town's velodrome still stands, now a little worse for wear but tells a story of time when cycling was king in Collie.

“Collie had and still has a thriving cycling community and industry and once had bike shops and manufacturers in town – Bill Atkinson's Collie Star Cycles were known to be very high quality and are now very collectable,” said Erik.

The 'Collie to Donnybrook and Return Cycling Classic' is one of the oldest road cycling events in WA and is coming up to its 100th anniversary in 2025.

“I'm expecting that with the new trails, we will have many more cycle tourists coming to Collie to continue that long cycling tradition,” said Erik.

Today, the 1000-kilometre Munda Biddi mountain bike trail and 1000-kilometre Bibbulmun Track walk trail pass through Collie bringing a steady stream of visitors. While the Bibbulmun Track already passes directly through the town, a realignment of the Munda Biddi Trail is underway so that it will also come into town, rather than a spur trail as is currently in place.

There are also new drive trails, such as the Collie Scenic Drive that follows the Collie River just out of town and a new sealed road links Collie, Wellington National Park and the Ferguson Valley.



“Collie has a great soul... people in Collie are resilient and adaptable and while the changes won’t be easy, investment and planning will help the transition we are all facing.”

MINE SITE TO SKI LAKE

But it’s not just the trails investment that will attract new visitors. Lake Kepwari is a former open cut coal mine south east of Collie that filled with water after mining ceased.

The water body has long been identified as having great potential as a ski area, with a large expanse of water and still conditions for much of the year. DBCA project manager Glenn Willmott has been overseeing the transformation from mine site to ski lake.

“It’s really going to be something special,” said Glenn. “The lake is so calm, the water inviting, and the new facilities and camping areas are right on the lake. You can camp, swim, ski, picnic – it’s a stunning place.”

With ample car and trailer parking, picnic shelters on the lake edge, a boat ramp and floating jetty, campgrounds and new sealed road, Lake Kepwari opened for visitors in late 2020 and is a popular addition to Collie’s outdoor adventure options.

MEGA MURAL

The centrepiece of the \$1.5-million Collie Mural Trail is the creation of a mega

mural on the Wellington Dam wall – likely the largest artwork by a single artist anywhere in the world.

Artist Guido van Helten has been selected to paint the Wellington Dam mural. A world-renowned large-scale mural artist, van Helten’s work is characterised by extensive research and technical precision to create photo realistic images.

“I am looking forward to learning more about Collie’s rich history of industry and the environment; and I will hopefully be able to bring together a shared vision of Collie’s historical identity with its future as a tourism and recreation hotspot in WA’s south-west,” said Mr van Helten.

“The Wellington Dam is already an iconic structure of great heritage value; through my process, I aim to make an artwork that respects the historical significance of this structure while making certain it is harmonious with the natural setting of Wellington National Park.”

A series of smaller murals painted by local Western Australian artists in and around Collie will complete the mural trail, expected to be completed in late 2020, and a new viewing walk trail, lookouts and improved visitor facilities at Wellington Dam will complement the mural work.

LAST WORD

John Wallace is a Collie local and trail guru who understands the unique nature of the environment around Collie.

“We have this gem sitting in clear view,” said John. “Sometimes I have felt like a voice in the wilderness, spruiking the benefits of building Collie as a trail town.

“I’ve been all round the world to look at how others do it, and we have all the building blocks to be as good or better. But don’t take my word for it, come and experience it for yourself, you might be surprised what you find.”

Above left Willman Bilya walk trail.
Photo – Cliff Winfield

Above Site of the mega mural at Wellington Dam.
Photo – Rod Annear/DBCA

Below Arklow mountain bike trails.
Photo – Frances Andrijich



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