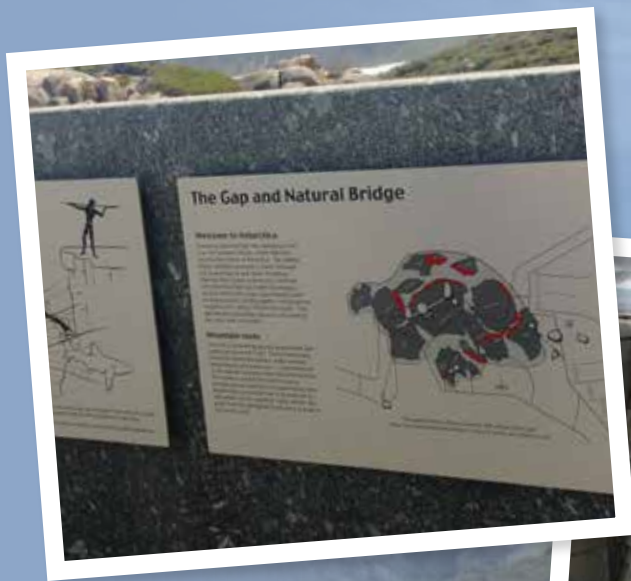


# Bridging the gap

The art of interpretation and its importance in geology

We can connect with nature by immersing ourselves in the outdoors, but we can elevate this connection to a whole new level by understanding the value of the landforms around us, their history and cultural significance.

by Professor Ross Dowling AM and Dr Steve Crawford



Be safe. Stay on paths.





**W**estern Australia is home to some of the world's most impressive landforms. We look in awe at wonders like Mount Augustus or The Gap and can appreciate them for their natural beauty and their sheer size and scale. How we respond and connect to that visual experience is enhanced by understanding what we are seeing. This is where geological interpretation plays a key role.

Interpretation is more than just information. Interpretation in national parks is about engaging visitors with storytelling and the use of subtle themes that enable visitors to understand and appreciate the value of our history, environment and culture. Effective interpretation helps visitors connect with a place on both an intellectual and emotional level.

In places where the geology is interpreted, it is generally presented in the three basic elements — form, process and time.

'Form' refers to what you can see — the shape of an area including its landscape and landforms. 'Process' describes how the landscape and landforms originated and were modified through astonishing processes such as volcanism, plate tectonics and erosion. 'Time' refers to when and how long these processes occurred.

## GEO INTERPRETATION

It is common to see information about flora and fauna on signage in our national parks, often with messages about the importance of conserving biodiversity. Geological interpretation on the other hand, informs visitors about the landscape and landforms, which are literally the foundation of the biotic (living) aspects of any park.

While geological interpretation is important, it can be complex and on a scale in time and space that is difficult to relate to. This may explain why geo-interpretation is not as commonly seen in parks.

## CREATING CONNECTIONS

While sharing information and knowledge is an obvious outcome of interpretation, the underlying motivation is to help visitors appreciate the significance of an area so they will value it and want to protect it. Some might argue it is difficult to feel emotional about rocks, while others are able to feel a deep connection with our ancient landforms (see, 'Rocking the patterns', *LANDSCOPE* Winter 2021).

To help visitors make meaningful and ongoing connections to the landscape, geo-interpretation ideally includes aspects

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**Main** Torndirrup National Park.

*Photo – Kevin Smith*

**Insets from top** Signage detail showing rock types and The Gap viewing platform.

*Photos – Emma Banks, Sally Treasure*

**Above and below** Interpretive sign at Fitzgerald River National Park and detail of sign artwork.

**Above right** Interpretive signage at Canal Rocks, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park.

*Photos – Ann Storrie*





Listen to more about the art of interpretation

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's podcast.



**Above left and left** Dreaming story of the Menang People at Torndirrup National Park.  
*Photos – Lorna Charlton, Emma Banks*

**Above** Interpretive signage at Torndirrup National Park.  
*Photo – Kevin Smith*

of the 'head', 'heart' and 'hands'. This includes *learning* about the geology of an area (head), *connecting* the visitor to the landscape in an engaging way (heart) and inspiring the visitor into *doing* something for the geological environment (hands).

When done well, interpretation also provides different perspectives that allow visitors to see something in new and surprising ways. The Gap and Natural Bridge near Albany is a great example of geological interpretation in action.

### HIGH EXPECTATIONS

The Gap and Natural Bridge is in Torndirrup National Park, 18 kilometres from the centre of Albany. The park

was gazetted in 1918, one of the first in Western Australia, and its remarkable coastal feature and popular park attraction, The Gap, is now firmly established as a world-class geotourism experience thanks to a park rejuvenation project completed in 2016.

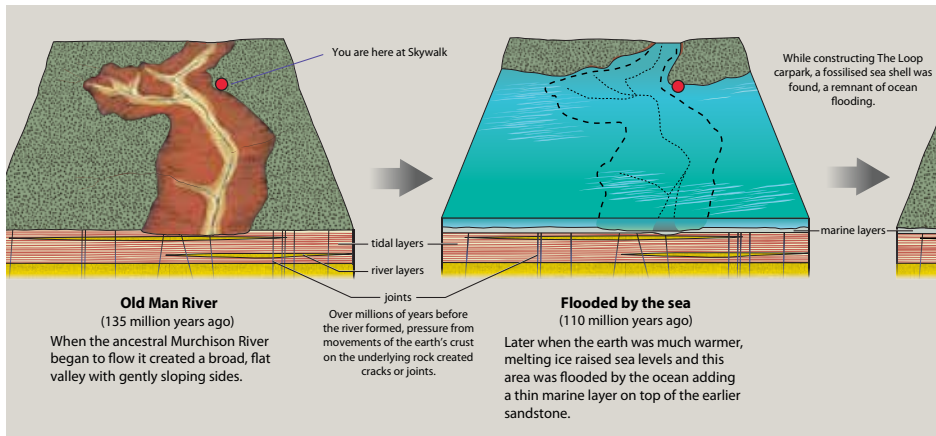
Visitors to The Gap can venture out onto a cantilevered platform almost 40 metres above the Southern Ocean, while the solid pathway and viewing area of the Natural Bridge provides a less adventurous but still remarkable window to one of Australia's most impressive coastlines. The edgy design of the site allows visitors to venture over a previously inaccessible precipice so that they can safely experience the awe and excitement

of dramatic coastal geology and spectacular scenery in all weather conditions.

"There's nothing like the sight, sound and feel of giant ocean waves crashing against massive granite cliffs as they shape the coastline. On a good day you can even taste the salt spray," Parks and Wildlife Service's visitor communications and marketing manager, Steve Crawford said.

"These days we aim to provide visitors with deeply immersive experiences that deliver both emotional and insightful outcomes," Steve said. "At The Gap and Natural Bridge, those insights are created with the stories that we tell on our interpretive signage."





## TORNDIRRUP ROCKS

Through simple, easy to understand language coupled with clever interpretive design, the geological story of how the impressive rock formations were created is revealed to visitors. Samples of granodiorite and gneiss, two distinctive rock types, are featured on the signs so that visitors can better understand the formations they are looking at.

A massive map, set in the pathway that leads to the viewing areas, depicts the world's landmasses as they are thought to have appeared around 900 million years ago. It reveals that at the time Australia was part of the supercontinent 'Rodinia' and located near the North Pole. Rodinia endured for 300 million years before it broke apart, scattering smaller continents in its wake. The enormous scales in time and space over which these processes have occurred is something that invariably leaves us in awe.

In addition to the geological stories of The Gap and Natural Bridge is the cultural response to this landscape and in particular the way in which people's lives have been shaped. The Menang people are the Traditional Owners of this area

and their Dreaming story explains the cultural significance of the rock formations and how this place and its story are the basis of a deep and ongoing spiritual connection to the land and sea. The Dreaming story allows visitors to see this landscape from a different perspective and gain a greater appreciation of Menang culture.

By combining the exhilaration of the viewing platform with clever interpretation, this experience will leave everlasting memories of how the Earth's geology and our world have been, and continue to be, shaped by powerful forces.

## KEEPING IT LOCAL

In April 2016, a multimillion-dollar rejuvenation project at The Gap and Natural Bridge included significant improvements to visitor facilities.

"Prior to the investment in new facilities, visitation hovered around the 150,000 visitors annually but now we consistently see around 250,000 visitors," Steve said.

"The estimated spend from visitors who are attracted to the Albany area to experience the natural environment,

including The Gap and Natural Bridge is around \$24 million annually."

The art of interpretation is also the art of value-adding and geotourism is now delivering an enhanced economic opportunity to the local community.

As you travel around the State visiting our national parks, start looking out for more informed and engaging interpretation about the land beneath your feet.

**Top left and above left** Interpretive signage at Kalbarri skywalk.

*Photo – Kevin Smith*

**Top and above** Interpretive signage at Granite Skywalk, Castle Rock.

*Photos – Tiffany Taylor*

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