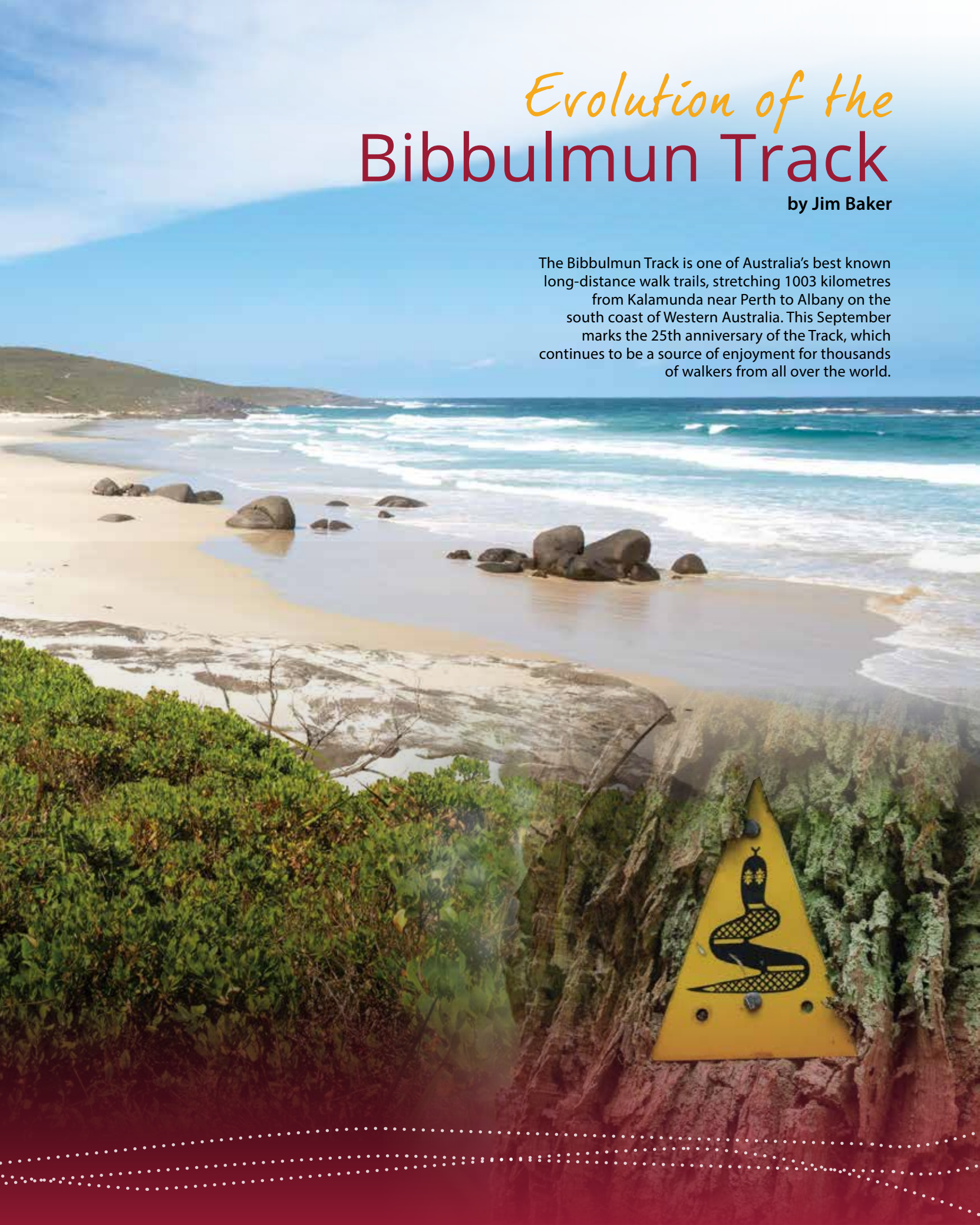




Evolution of the Bibbulmun Track

by Jim Baker

The Bibbulmun Track is one of Australia's best known long-distance walk trails, stretching 1003 kilometres from Kalamunda near Perth to Albany on the south coast of Western Australia. This September marks the 25th anniversary of the Track, which continues to be a source of enjoyment for thousands of walkers from all over the world.



Bushwalking or hiking is one of the oldest outdoor recreations, enjoyed by people of all ages and abilities.

Hiking trails inspire tourists from around the world to discover new landscapes, vegetation types and terrain.

In the late 1960s in Western Australia, it was becoming obvious to a growing interest group that, despite having incredibly beautiful countryside, WA did not have a long-distance walk trail worthy of international appeal.

A conversation between the founder of the Perth Bushwalkers Club, Geoff Schafer, and the then Minister of Forests changed all that and the concept of the Bibbulmun Track was born.

The Forests Department was small, with limited funds or knowledge of long-distance trails. However, there were some, notably Peter Hewett and Ross Gobby, who worked hard to plan and design a route for the track.

The Bibbulmun Track was opened in October 1979 in recognition of Indigenous people who had inhabited the south-west corner of the State and had a practice of walking long distances to ceremonial events. The Track started in Kalamunda and finished in Northcliffe and was officially opened as part of the celebrations for the 150th anniversary since the founding of the Swan Colony.

The opening was marked by the 'Bibbulmun Walk '79' involving more than 1000 walkers and attracted much attention with local communities along the way.

EARLY DAYS

It had always been part of Geoff Schafer's dream to create a trail that could be used by walkers of all ages, from those who simply wanted the opportunity to take the kids into the bush for the day, to hardened bushwalkers prepared to take on an end-to-end walk.

However, the first iteration of the Bibbulmun Track mostly followed gravel roads. There were no designated campsites, no toilet facilities, limited water supply and insufficient trail markers. A track for hardened walkers, perhaps,



but not very family friendly or suitable for novices.

In 1987, the Track underwent a significant overhaul under the auspices of the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM).

This project, overseen by project officer Drew Griffiths, saw the northern section rerouted further east to avoid bauxite mining areas and the southern section extended down to the coast as far as Walpole. Over the next few years, it was estimated that some 5000 people per year were using the Track, justifying Geoff Schafer's concept of encouraging people into the bush.

The basic black and white guidebooks for the route were replaced by coloured versions, and 'waugal' trail markers improved the signage. The distinctive black and yellow markers depict a rainbow serpent, deeply significant in Aboriginal mythology.

BUILDING A BETTER TRACK

CALM recognised the inadequacies of the Track and in October 1993 the *Build a Better Bibbulmun Track* project was set up with the objective of turning the Track into a world-class long-distance walk trail.

CALM's Jim Sharp headed a steering committee along with Jesse Brampton,

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Main Walking Walpole to Denmark along the Bibbulmun Track.

Photo – Janine Guenther

Inset A waugal trail marker.

Photo – DBCA

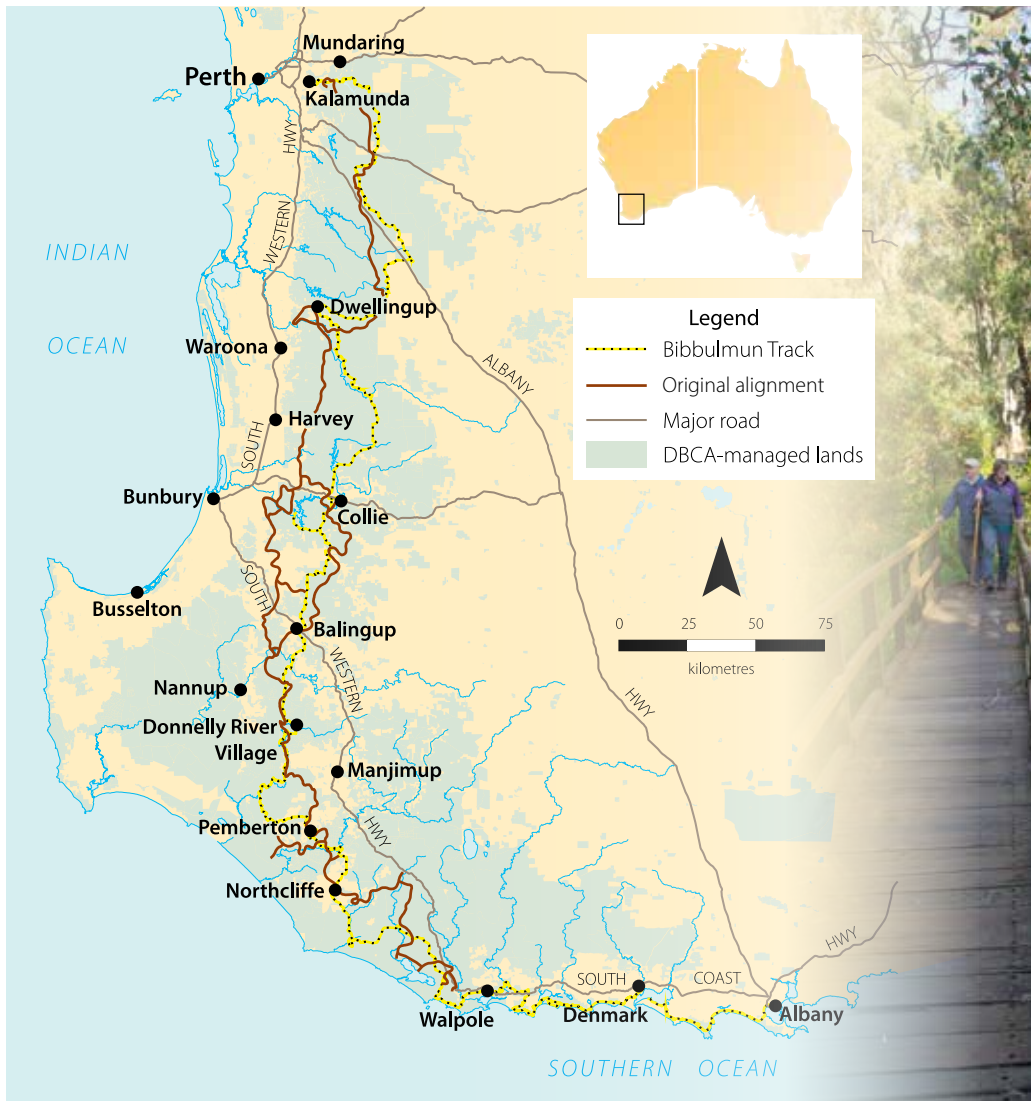
Above Walking into Chadoora shelter.

Photo – Bibbulmun Track Foundation

who was appointed as project contractor. Jesse had recently returned to WA after walking the Appalachian Trail in the USA—one of the oldest and arguably the most famous hiking trail in the world, running almost 2200 miles from Georgia to Maine. The new model for the Bibbulmun Track was inspired by Jesse's experience on the Appalachian Trail.

In February 1994, the Track was realigned to extend to Albany and a strong emphasis was placed on involving the community at large in the project. Premier Richard Court threw his support behind the upgrading and extension of the Track and its capacity to become an icon for the tourist industry of WA.

The word was sent out to local governments, regional tourist centres, Aboriginal corporations, community



groups and bushwalking clubs. The response was outstanding, and it was obvious that a formal group needed to be established to harness all that public enthusiasm.

GETTING ORGANISED

In mid-1994, the project needed funding as well as the provision of labour, materials and tools. A turning point came later in the year when the Ministry of Justice announced funding and support by offering to prefabricate campsite shelters in prison workshops. Prisoners were allowed to assist in reconstructing the shelters on the Track and in land clearing activities.

To be a member of a work crew on the Bibbulmun Track became a sought after privilege and the efforts of individual

prisoners were recognised in various ways. The growth in self-esteem of these men and the pride they took in creating the Track became very clear, and a strong rapport grew between the prisoners, the officers and the CALM supervisors.

By the end of 1998, the benefits to CALM and the Ministry of Justice were becoming obvious and high-level talks were held between the two agencies regarding the use of prison labour for further projects.

In 1998, the Premier's Award for Public Sector Management was awarded jointly to CALM and the Ministry of Justice for their combined efforts in creating the Bibbulmun Track. At the time it was noted that the contribution 'in-kind' support from the Ministry exceeded \$1.5 million.

In 1996, a \$1.38 million Federal grant meant works could be completed and the 'new' Track was opened in September 1998.

Forty-eight campsites were completed, each with an open-fronted timber shelter, large rainwater tank, toilet facilities and

Top Peter Hewett (left) and Geoff Schafer pictured in 2008.

Photo – Bibbulmun Track Foundation

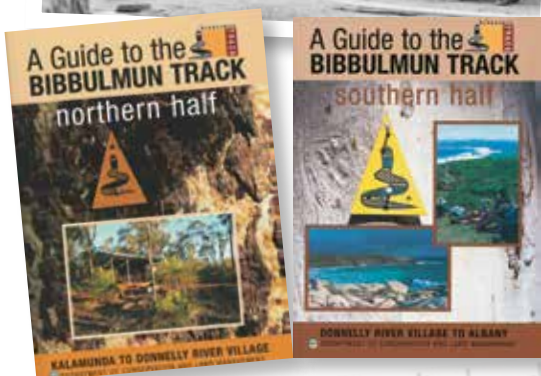
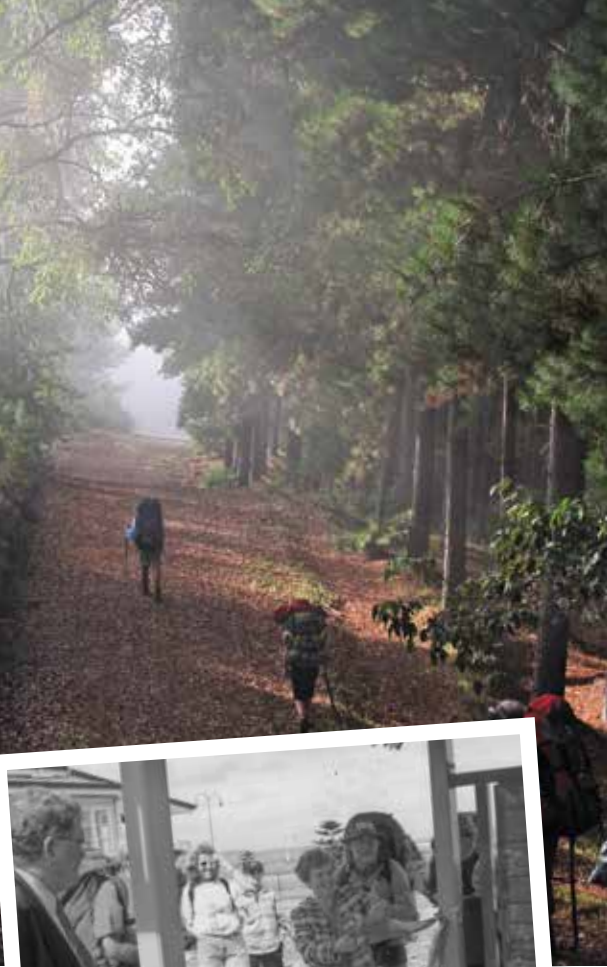
Above Prisoners clearing the Track.

Photo – DBCA

Above left Bridge over Harris Dam.

Photo – Chris Tate

Background Article from CALM News 1994.



“The route of the Track remains fundamentally the same as it was in 1998 with the exception of some realignments and two new campsites...”

areas where tents could be pitched. In addition, a large amount of infrastructure was constructed in the form of footbridges and boardwalks.

Two detailed guidebooks were drawn up covering the northern and southern sections of the Track respectively, along with a new series of eight maps. The opening was marked, just as it was in 1979, with an end-to-end walk from Albany to Kalamunda.

MANY HANDS

The construction of the Track was just one part of a much bigger picture. Maintaining the Track and marketing it to attract local, interstate and overseas walkers was a whole other endeavour.

In 1997, the ‘Friends of the Bibbulmun Track’ was established in the form of a not-for-profit organisation and the inaugural board meeting was held in August.

Since then, the number of walkers has increased exponentially, and recent surveys show a high level of satisfaction with all aspects of the Track. The Friends of the Bibbulmun Track is now known

Top left Walkers through pine forest near Blackwood before it was impacted by bushfire.
Photo – Bibbulmun Track Foundation

Above Noggerup campsite.

Inset top left Then Minister for Environment Cheryl Edwardes opening the Track in September 1998.

Inset above left CALM staff and families constructing a shelter.
Photos – DBCA

Left Detailed guidebooks from 1998.

Background Article from *CALM News* 2002.

Bibbulmun Track a lifeline for displaced time



DO IT YOURSELF

Where is it? On the Bibbulmun Track from Kalamunda to Albany. Join the epic journey as a sectional walker on a commemorative walk as part of the 25th anniversary celebrations.

Community events As the official end-to-end walkers make their way from Kalamunda to the Southern Terminus in Albany, a community celebration will be held in each of the towns through which the Track passes.

Everyone is invited to join in for the half-way party at Donnelly River Village.

More information Visit bibbulmuntrack.org.au/walk-the-track/25th-anniversary-celebrations/ for key dates and information.

as the Bibbulmun Track Foundation and has increased in size to a membership base of some 2800 and in excess of 450 volunteers engaged to support the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCAs) in various aspects of managing, marketing and maintaining the Track.

The Track has been surveyed using modern GPS equipment and a very detailed set of eight guidebooks has been produced.

Track maintenance has been improved by the introduction of a more streamlined volunteer training program and the provision of battery powered tools such as brush cutters and trimmers. In addition, a group of Support Volunteers (see 'It takes a village', *LANDSCOPE* Winter 2019) has been formed, consisting of people with specialised skills who can assist the DBCAs Parks and Wildlife Service staff in more complex tasks such as bridge refurbishment and erosion control.

ADAPTING AND EVOLVING

The route of the Track remains fundamentally the same as it was in

1998 with the exception of some realignments and two new campsites that were created to replace the old Hidden Valley site that was moved to accommodate the Albany Wind Farm.

One major change has been the re-routing necessitated by the tragic loss of the heritage listed Long Gully Bridge to a bushfire. The old wooden bridge was replaced in a new location by a steel suspension bridge to reduce the impact of fire damage in the future.

Bushfires have caused the destruction of seven campsites, and this has led to changes in the materials used to construct the shelters, which are now built with fire resistant materials such as rammed earth.

It is fair to say the Bibbulmun Track has been a resounding success. It has become known as a world-class walking trail and there is no reason to suppose that it will not remain so for at least another 25 years!

This September, in true Bibbulmun Track style, a commemorative walk will be held to honour the 25th anniversary of the beloved Track.

Top far left and far left The Long Gully Bridge lost to fire in 2015 and the new Bilya Djena Bidi across the Murray River.

Photos – Jim Hughes

Above Hiker studying map.

Photo – Janine Guenther

Below South coast trail markers and track.

Photo – Chris Tate



Jim Baker is a volunteer with the Bibbulmun Track Foundation and an avid bushwalker, having completed an end-to-end of the Track four times. He can be contacted at jim_baker@bigpond.com