

BACKGROUND

by Andrew A. Burbidge

Department of Conservation and Land Management, Western Australian Wildlife Research Centre,
P.O. Box 51, Wanneroo, W.A. 6065.

Abstract

The Lesueur Area is an area of 27 493 ha near Jurien Bay some 220 km to the north of Perth. It has long been recognised as an area of outstanding flora conservation values and unusually rugged terrain in the subdued landforms of the northern kwongan region. It has been recommended for reservation by botanists, the Australian Academy of Science, the Conservation Through Reserves Committee and the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA). These recommendations were endorsed by Cabinet in 1976 and again in 1983, but the presence of coal deposits at the eastern end of the Lesueur Area has prevented reservation to the present day.

In 1989 the EPA sought from the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) a detailed evaluation of the nature conservation, landscape and recreation values of the Lesueur Area.

This publication is CALM's submission to the EPA.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Lesueur Area is situated about 220 km north of Perth, near the coastal town of Jurien (Figure 1.1). The area around Mount Lesueur has been recommended for reservation for many years because of its very high nature conservation values (Western Australian Sub-Committee of the Australian Academy of Science Committee on National Parks 1965, CTCRC 1974).

In 1989, The Environmental Protection Authority requested the Department of Conservation and Land Management to prepare a report on the nature conservation, landscape, recreation and educational values of the Lesueur Area, and this report was prepared in response to that request.

1.2 REGIONAL SETTING

The south west of Western Australia is world famous for the richness, diversity and uniqueness of its native plants and animals.

For an area of low relief and relatively low rainfall, south-western Australia has an exceptional number of species of vascular plants (more than 4 000), many of which are very beautiful. In addition, a very high proportion are found nowhere else in the world - over 80% of the plants of the south west are endemic to the region.

There are three nodes in the south west which are exceptionally rich in plant species (Hopper 1979, George *et al.* 1979) These are:

1. The Fitzgerald River and Barren Ranges area.
2. The Stirling Range.
3. The Lesueur area.

Between these nodes are the farming areas of the wheatbelt. Within the wheatbelt there are sandplains and lateritic areas of high species richness.

While the Stirling Range and Fitzgerald River nodes have considerable overlap of species very few are shared with the Lesueur node.

The botanical significance of these nodes is of international importance. The complex sandplain or heath shrub vegetation, known locally as "kwongan" (an Aboriginal word), has plant species richness unequalled by most other vegetation types in the world, except the fynbos of southern Africa and some tropical rainforests.

The fauna of south-western Australia is also rich in endemic and unusual species (Keast 1981, Heatwole 1987). Among vertebrates the south west harbours numerous relict species, many with no close relatives elsewhere - examples include the Honey Possum, the Western Swamp Tortoise, the Turtle Frog and the Karri Minnow. Among invertebrates the degree of endemism is even higher with many species having

co-evolved with the flora, e.g. the strikingly beautiful jewel beetles (Buprestidae).

Two of the three very important nodes mentioned above are protected within secure nature conservation reserves - the Fitzgerald River and Stirling Range National Parks. Over recent decades conservation agencies have worked hard to protect what is left of the wheatbelt vegetation in secure reserves as well. Little opportunity now exists to extend the reserve system in the wheatbelt, where most of the land is privately owned and cleared, except at its arid periphery and in small remnants on private land and in Crown reserves.

While there are conservation reserves in the northern kwongan, for example Nambung National Park, Drovers Cave National Park, Badgingarra National Park, the Beekeepers Reserve and South Eneabba Nature Reserve (Figure 1.1), these reserves do not nearly represent the full range of ecosystems and species that occur in the region. In addition, some are small and, in some cases, they are subject to disturbance, e.g. mineral sand mining in South Eneabba Nature Reserve.

1.3 THE MOUNT LESUEUR AREA

The nature conservation significance of the area near Mount Lesueur has been recognised and extolled for many decades.

Mount Lesueur and Mount Peron were named by the Baudin Expedition in 1801, but expedition members did not land there (see Chapter 2, European Exploration). In 1850 the well-known early botanist James Drummond was the first to collect plants at Lesueur. His letters to Sir Joseph Hooker, Director of Kew Gardens, published by Hooker (Drummond 1853), were the first account of the importance of the Lesueur area for flora conservation.

The Government Botanist, Charles Gardner, published a more detailed account of the area in 1947. In the 1950s, concerned at the effects the rapid alienation of land for farming was having on native flora, Gardner made a series of land-mark recommendations for the protection of important botanical areas. These recommendations resulted in the reservation of several of Western Australia's most valuable national parks and nature reserves, among them Kalbarri National Park, Fitzgerald River National Park, Cape Arid National Park, Jilbadji Nature Reserve and the Beekeepers Flora Reserve. Gardner also recommended the reservation of the Lesueur area but no action was taken, apparently because of the existence of a reserve for "Horse Breeding", dating from the days when horses were needed by the Army. However, the importance of Mt Lesueur itself was

recognised at this time by the creation of a reserve for "Educational Purposes (University of Western Australia)" (reserve no. 24275). Another reserve with the same purpose was created at the same time at Mt Benia in the southern Gairdner Range.

The first major review of national parks and nature reserves in Western Australia was by the Australian Academy of Science, which set up a sub-committee in each State. The 1962 report of the Academy (Western Australian Sub-Committee of the Australian Academy of Science Committee on National Parks 1965) stressed the nature conservation importance of the Lesueur area and recommended that it be declared a Class A reserve for a national park.

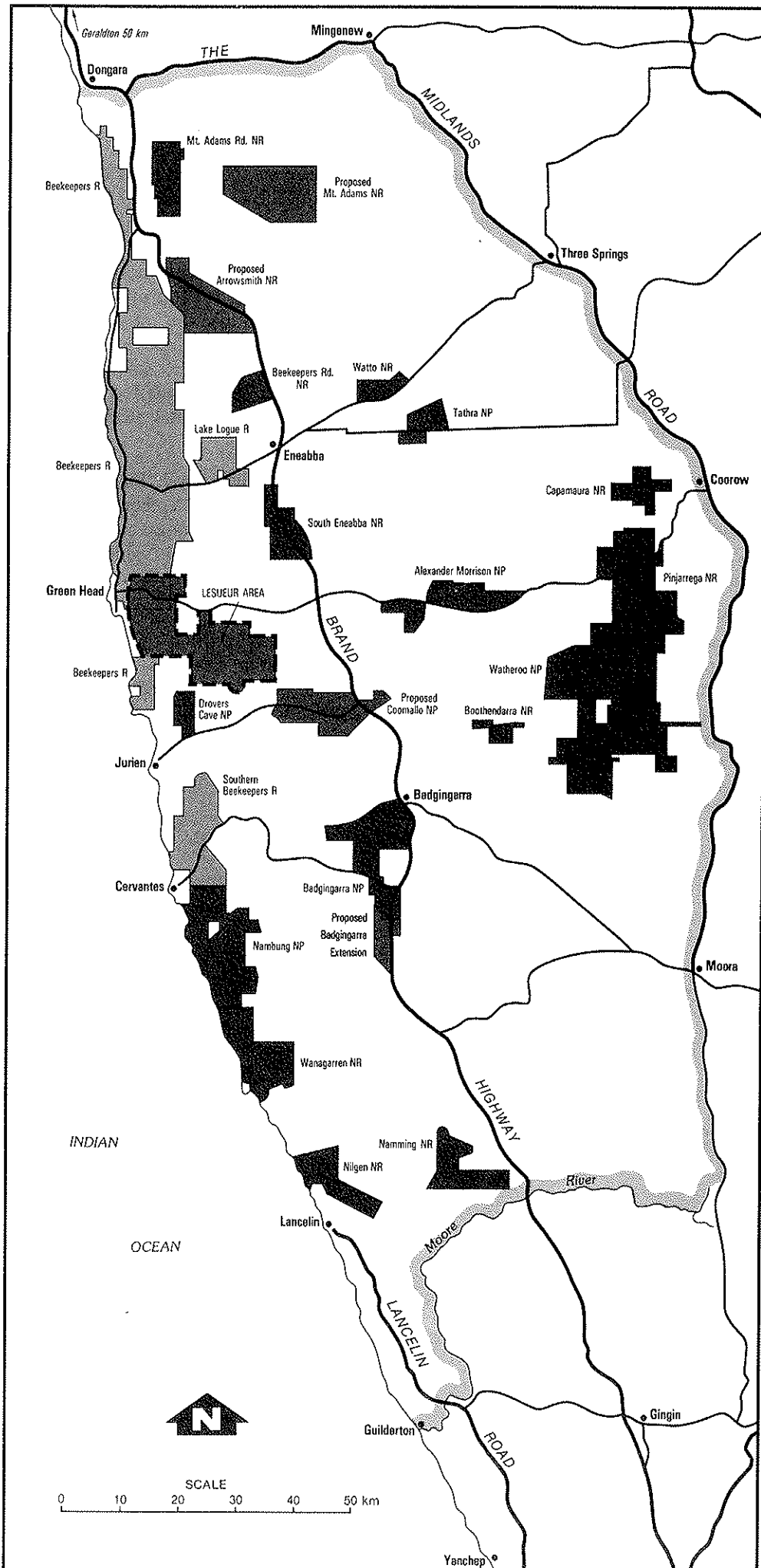
The last major review of nature conservation reserves in Western Australia, that of the Environmental Protection Authority's Conservation Through Reserves Committee (CTRC) in 1974, recommended consolidating several existing reserves and some vacant Crown land in the Lesueur area into a Class A reserve for the conservation of flora and fauna (i.e. a nature reserve). Having summarised the attributes of the Lesueur area, the Committee stated "Thus in 1974 there is an urgent need for consolidation of the Mt. Lesueur Reserves under the control of a single vesting authority and the implementation of a management plan" (p. 5.29).

Following a period of public review, the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) endorsed the CTRC recommendation and forwarded it to Government. The recommendation was endorsed by State Cabinet on 20 October 1976. However, the recommendation was not implemented because of the objections of the Mines Department, which believed that coal in the area should be available for exploration without hindrance.

In 1982-83 a compromise agreement was achieved whereby the Mines Department agreed to the creation of a Class C reserve on condition that there would be continuing access for mineral and petroleum exploration. This was agreed to by State Cabinet on 16 May 1983 and instructions to create the reserve were passed to the Department of Land Administration. In the ensuing six months the boundaries of the reserve were finalised (the main change being excision of the high recreation value coastal strip, west of the planned coastal highway), but the reserve was not created due to concern regarding the coal deposits.

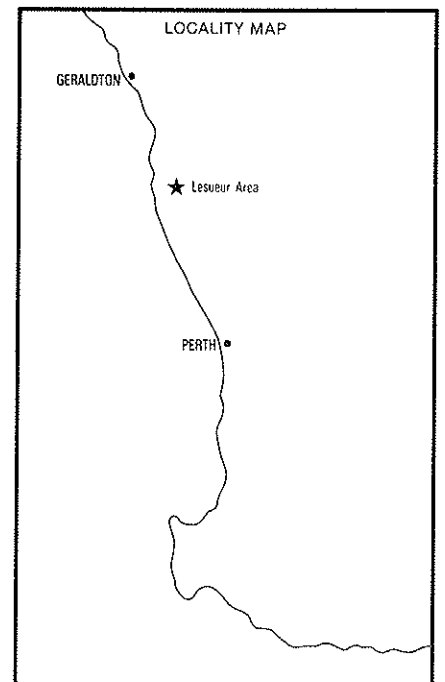
More recently, the passing of the Conservation and Land Management Act created the new Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) that is responsible for both national parks and nature reserves, and a new National Parks and Nature Conservation

**Figure 1:1
EXISTING AND PROPOSED
CONSERVATION RESERVES
OF THE NORTHERN KWONGAN**



LEGEND

- Major Road
- Minor Road
- Study Area
- Existing National Park, Nature Reserve
- Existing "other" Conservation Reserve
- Proposed National Park, Nature Reserve
- Lesueur Area



Authority (NPNCA) to replace the previous National Parks Authority (responsible for national parks) and the Western Australian Wildlife Authority (responsible for nature reserves). The NPNCA has recommended that the Lesueur Area be declared a national park because of its high landscape and recreational values in addition to its very high nature conservation values.

In February 1988 the Western Australian Government released a new Policy on Exploration and Mining in National Parks and Nature Reserves. Under this Policy, areas recommended for reservation by the EPA and endorsed by State Cabinet, are to be declared national parks and nature reserves, and mining applications are to be dealt with by Parliament following evaluation by the EPA. A Task Force was set up under the Policy to accelerate the declaration of these reserves, including the Lesueur Area. Again, progress in the Task Force was delayed because of concern regarding the coal deposits.

In January 1989 the NPNCA received comprehensive briefings on the nature conservation values of the Lesueur area and on proposals for coal mining for power generation. The Authority concluded that mining should not be permitted within the proposed reserve and that the Government should move immediately to protect the area. These views were transmitted to the Minister for Conservation and Land Management and to the Environmental Protection Authority.

In March 1989 Canning Resources Pty Ltd and The Hill River Power Development Company Pty Ltd submitted a Notice of Intent (NOI) to the EPA under the relevant provisions of the Environmental Protection Act. The NOI stated that the Companies proposed to develop an open-cut mine and power station to supply power to the State Energy Commission of Western Australia. About half of the area proposed to be mined, and the conceptual location of the power station, are within the Lesueur Area. The EPA decided that the proposal should be subject to the highest level of evaluation, and requested that the Company prepare an Environmental Review and Management Plan (ERMP).

In order to provide the basis for thorough evaluation of the proposal the EPA then requested CALM to prepare a report on the nature conservation, recreation, landscape and education values of the Lesueur area.

This report was prepared in response to that request. It should be emphasised that this report only covers technical areas within CALM's responsibility (i.e. nature conservation, landscapes and recreational use in a proposed conservation reserve context). Other Government agencies will address aspects such as mineral resources, energy supply, economic and social issues, hydrology, air pollution, etc., in their own submissions to the EPA.