

RECREATION AND EDUCATION VALUES

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Abstract

Recreational and educational values, while not well documented, are nevertheless of major regional importance. Although the Lesueur Area has not been widely promoted and is relatively distant from major population centres, it presently attracts a wide range of recreational use, including nature study, sightseeing, photography, bushwalking, camping and four-wheel driving. Indications are that visitation levels have increased in recent times. This trend is likely to continue, particularly as the area becomes better known. Given adequate protection through reservation and management, the Lesueur Area has the capacity to attract and sustain a much higher level of public use than at present. Opportunities for interpretation of the natural environment are also numerous.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) has a statutory responsibility to ensure that recreational opportunities and educational values are sensitively managed and promoted on the public lands and waters entrusted to it. This is reflected in the Department's enabling legislation and its Strategic Plan which includes among its five primary management objectives the following:

Recreation : To facilitate the public enjoyment of the natural attributes of public lands and reserved waters in a manner that does not compromise conservation and other management objectives.

Knowledge : To seek a better understanding of the natural environment and to promote awareness and appreciation of its values.

Achievement of these two objectives is dependent on the reservation of adequate natural areas capable of attracting and sustaining public use. Once reserved, it is imperative that these areas are carefully managed so as to protect them from inappropriate activities or excessive use.

Presently some 17 million hectares of land or approximately 6.5% of Western Australia have been gazetted as National Parks, Nature Reserves, State Forest or given similar reserve status. Of this total, nearly 10 million hectares has been specifically reserved for the conservation of fauna and flora, with the remaining 7 million available for a range of other uses including recreation.

Apart from the more obvious commercial values associated with water, timber, fauna and flora, CALM lands are also of immeasurable economic and social value for community recreation, tourism, education and scientific study. It is sometimes argued that reserving land in National Parks or other reserves reduces their commercial value and utility. On the contrary, the opposite is more often the case. Western Australia in recent years has begun to reap the enormous financial benefits which its natural environments provide in terms of attracting recreation and tourism dollars and generating foreign exchange on a large scale. Providing visitor activities and pressures are carefully planned and managed, the resultant economic and social benefits and the natural values on which they are dependent can be maintained indefinitely.

10.2 REGIONAL CONTEXT

The Lesueur Area is arguably the most significant area within southwestern Australia recommended for reservation but yet to be gazetted. If created, this park would complement a number of other northern kwongan reserves that include Alexander Morrison, Badgingarra, Drovers Cave, Kalbarri, Nambung, Tathra and Watheroo National Parks.

The majority of existing northern kwongan reserves have some documentation of conservation values, but their value and use for public recreation and educational purposes is not well established. The two exceptions are Kalbarri and Nambung National Parks, which contain land and/or water features of high scenic appeal and visitor interest. The Lesueur Area is similar to these latter two parks in that its diverse landscapes

hold considerable recreational appeal for a range of users and activities.

10.3 POTENTIAL VALUE AND USE FOR RECREATION AND EDUCATION

The potential value and use of the Lesueur Area for recreational and educational purposes is difficult to gauge accurately, as little information on current use levels is available. It is known, however, that the area is:

- visited by wildflower groups and individuals interested in nature study and photography.
- frequently visited by 4WD clubs who have, in recent years, conducted a number of excursions through the Gairdner Range.
- used by Scout and Venturer groups as well as other groups and individuals for bushwalking, camping and related activities.

In previous years, the Gairdner Range has also been used for Army manoeuvres as well as activities such as pig hunting. The level of wilderness camping also appears to be substantial, judging by the remains of numerous campfires evident in the woodland areas situated throughout the Range. Thus while the area is a considerable distance from large population centres and has not been actively promoted, it is nevertheless receiving a considerable degree of visitor use.

Perhaps the best indication of the potential level of recreational use the Lesueur Area could satisfy comes from some recent visitor survey figures generated for Nambung National Park 35 km to the south. In 1984, the number of visitors at Nambung was 50 000 decreasing to 41 000 visitors in 1985. During 1986/87, a major road reconstruction programme was carried out to improve access to the Pinnacles Desert. At the same time, coastal and inland recreation areas were upgraded and educational and interpretative facilities provided. The following year (1987), visitor numbers to Nambung rose to 105 000, a 2.5 fold increase over the 1985 figure (Haynes 1988).

Much of this increase can be attributed to commercial tourist interests. Prior to 1984 only one coach company operated tours to Nambung. By 1986, 23 different companies were operating within the Park

with one company alone conducting three tours daily seven days a week. It is also worth noting that the net economic value of this increase in visitor numbers has been calculated to be in the order of \$9 million/annum, based on the "travel cost method" and 1987 visitor numbers. This represents a significant financial contribution to the regional and State economy.

Equally important in the Nambung example, the increase in visitation has not had any apparent detrimental impacts on Park values. To quote the survey report, ... "The results with respect to conservation have been pleasing. People are staying on marked access tracks, both the new access and the circuit track within the Pinnacles area. Despite the increase in numbers there has been no appreciable rise in vandalism or irresponsible behaviour."

In the case of Lesueur, the recreational "drawing power" of the Gairdner Range is not known. Certainly the appreciable landscape and conservation values, if sensibly promoted, interpreted and managed, can be expected to generate a substantial increase in sightseeing, bushwalking, compiling, nature study and similar activities. The recently completed small boat harbour and launching facility near Jurien is also likely to lead to increased visitor use and fishing activity along this section of the coast. This in turn could place increased visitor pressure on the inland areas, including the Lesueur Area.

The Lesueur Area is also rich in terms of its educational and interpretation potential. Apart from the wealth of plant species, the heath and woodland communities support a diverse range of birds, many of which are readily observable due to the open nature of the countryside. The Gairdner Ranges also afford excellent opportunities for studying and interpreting geological features, including a variety of exposed sediments which have been extensively faulted. The cultural history and use of the area, both Aboriginal and European, is likewise worthy of interpretation.

In summary, the Lesueur Area has obvious but as yet unrealised potential to attract a far greater level of public use than at present. Given appropriate management controls and input, the Gairdner Range is capable of offering a diverse range of recreational and educational opportunities without diminishing the area's considerable conservation values.