





More than **5 million reasons** to celebrate WA parks



In 2019, an ambitious target was set. Five million hectares of new conservation areas would be created across Western Australia—with the support of Traditional Owners—to enable the potential of a truly significant conservation outcome.

by **Sophie Henderson and
Carolyn Thomson-Dans**



In a State as vast and varied as Western Australia, the richness of biodiversity is staggering. These ancient lands are brimming with stories and songlines of custodians that traversed the dry deserts, deep forests and seemingly limitless stretches of coastline in kinship with nature for more than fifty thousand years.

Today, efforts are being made to add more than six million hectares of land

“Consolidating the sites into national parks ensures that the area’s unique native plants and animals are adequately protected as part of WA’s conservation network.”

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Main Nyinggulu (Ningaloo) coastal reserves.

Photo – Samille Mitchell/DBCA

Inset (left to right) Australian sea lion (*Neophoca cinerea*), Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park. *Photo – Tourism WA*; Beaches along the south coast. *Photo – L-A Shibish*; Black-flanked rock-wallaby (*Petrogale lateralis lateralis*), Nyinggulu (Ningaloo). *Photo – Tourism WA*; Large waxflower (*Chamelaucium megalopetalum*). *Photo – Rob Davis*

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Above Burringurrah (Mount Augustus).

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Above right Aboriginal rangers in the midwest employed through Plan for Our Parks.

Photo – DBCA

and waters to the conservation estate; an amount to rival the size of Tasmania.

NEW LEASE ON LIFE

More than two decades ago, the State Government purchased certain pastoral leases for the purpose of converting them into national parks and conservation reserves.

The pastoral leases, most of which were in the Pilbara, Midwest, Murchison and Goldfields regions, had remained unreserved until the Plan for Our Parks initiative commenced in 2019 (see ‘Plan for our Parks’, *LANDSCOPE* Winter 2019).

Plan for Our Parks was announced with an ambitious target to add five million hectares to the conservation estate. Five years since the program started, Plan for Our Parks has exceeded this target and secured 6.5 million hectares of new and expanded national and marine parks and other conservation reserves, bringing with it significant cultural, environmental, social and conservation benefits.

The initiative has expanded the conservation estate to protect some of the State’s most valuable natural assets and cultural values, including wetlands, rangelands, forests, marine areas and scores of threatened flora and fauna.

It has also changed the future of joint management in WA, with the vast majority of the new parks and a number of existing national parks being jointly vested and jointly managed with Traditional Owners.

CONSERVING NATURE

Nature itself makes an incredible contribution to mitigating changes to the

climate, the impacts of invasive species and infectious diseases. As humans, we cannot be healthy in an unhealthy environment, and it is in our best interests to preserve the natural world around us.

More than 1000 native plant and animal species are currently regarded as threatened in WA, which is part of a broader issue across Australia and the world.

These new additions to WA’s conservation estate has meant 671 priority flora and fauna have been afforded protection in the past five years.

The new and expanded parks stretch from the Kimberley in the north, across WA’s Rangelands, through population centres in Perth and Bunbury, to WA’s south-west forests and along the southern coastline.

Spectacular biodiverse areas such as Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park, Ningaloo Coast and Matuwa Kurrara Kurrara National Park have all been protected.

COMING TOGETHER

The reservation of national and marine parks involves the consent of native title holders by way of an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) in accordance with the Commonwealth *Native Title Act 1993*. Plan for Our Parks has involved ILUAs with 21 different Traditional Owner groups across the State.

For Yinggarda Traditional Owner Terry McKie, having a sense of agency as to the use of the land is a significant step.

“It gives us the ability to control some of the outcomes within the area, like caring for Country as such, which is very

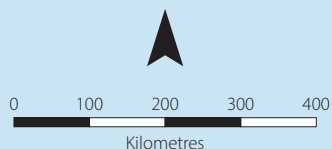
LEGEND

Land and waters under Plan for Our Parks

Roads

Tourism regions

- Australia's North West
- Australia's Golden Outback
- Australia's Coral Coast
- Destination Perth
- Australia's South West



Discover more about
Plan for Our Parks

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important to Aboriginal people,” Mr McKie said.

Through this partnership, Jidi Jidi Ranger Stuart Robinson has set foot on parts of Country he has not traversed for many years.

“It’s good to come up into the Country, exploring it to see what’s there, and finding sites that we didn’t know about before,” Mr Robinson said.

Yinggarda Traditional Owner Kath Ryan, sees Plan for Our Parks is an opportunity to have their voices heard.

“It’s a way of letting the younger generation and others know what is special about the land,” Ms Ryan said.

Plan for Our Parks is providing long-term employment opportunities and support for Traditional Owners to manage Country in the new reserves and parks. Especially since the areas identified for conservation are diverse ecosystems and heritage sites and known to be home to threatened species that need protection.

Once fully implemented, more than 269 full-time jobs will have been created across the State.

The majority of these positions are for Traditional Owners, including new jobs for Aboriginal rangers working on Country, to assist in Closing the Gap in line with WA’s Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy.

Nikita Smith said her role as a Jidi Jidi Ranger helps her feel close to the land.

“You feel connected to the land when you’re out doing what you’re doing. Especially with this job, looking after Country.”



Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park – the first park created

The creation of Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park, about 80 kilometres west of Geraldton, coincided with the 400-year anniversary of the European sighting of the islands by Dutch navigator Frederik de Houtman in 1619. It has the distinction of being the first park created under Plan for Our Parks.

The Abrolhos is an increasingly popular destination for fishing, diving and nature-based tourism due to the area’s incredible marine diversity. Some 200 species of coral vie for space in the protected islands and along the edges of nutrient-rich channels. Green, beige, blue and purple staghorn and plate corals sprawl out to capture light in the shallows and can be seen in only a metre of water. The Abrolhos was the site of the notorious *Batavia* mutiny of 1629, and a cannon from the *Batavia*, removed for use as a mooring years ago, can be seen beneath a jetty on Beacon Island. The improved visitor facilities in the new park are drawing in more local, interstate and international visitors, with increased opportunities for nature-based tourism and recreation on the islands.

The Abrolhos is the most important breeding area for seabirds in the State (see ‘Houtman Abrolhos: a seabird haven’, *LANDSCOPE* Autumn 2021). Pelsaert Island has more species of breeding seabird—more than 17 species—and more individual seabirds than any other island in Western Australia. The tammar wallaby (*Notamacropus eugenii*) has the distinction of being the first Australian marsupial recorded by a European, as Pelsaert saw the animals here in 1629 while in command of the *Batavia*.



Ningaloo Coast – a global icon

The jointly managed Nyinggulu (Ningaloo) Coastal Reserves, stretching 215 kilometres alongside Ningaloo Marine Park in Ningaloo World Heritage Area, were created under Plan for Our Parks to protect the natural and cultural values of Ningaloo, one of Western Australia's most spectacular tourism destinations.

The reserves are rich in ceremonial and mythological significance and protect turtle nesting areas, seabird and shorebird roosting and breeding areas, the threatened black-flanked rock-wallaby (*Petrogale lateralis lateralis*) and priority-listed flora species.

As joint managers of the reserves, the Nganhurra Thanardi Garrbu Aboriginal Corporation and Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) will safeguard culture, protect wildlife, support tourism and enhance economic development opportunities for Traditional Owners.

The reserves will preserve the sense of remoteness. Affordable and self-sufficient camping and caravanning experiences will be maintained, with a focus on experiencing a unique wilderness.



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5)



7)

MORE PEOPLE IN PARKS, BETTER FACILITIES

Local and international tourists want to see and experience WA's amazing natural environment.

There is considerable opportunity for further development of nature-based and cultural tourism attractions and facilities, based on the remoteness, isolation, vast open spaces and spectacular scenery of the new conservation areas.

Capital investments are also underway within the parks, such as new tracks and paths to enhance visitor access, interpretive material, ranger facilities to facilitate direct engagement between visitors and rangers, and the development of new camping experiences.

Park assets drive tourism, and the newly created parks give people new reasons to travel to the regions.

Of that, a significant portion of \$7.7 billion—or 46 per cent—was spent by those visitors who travelled beyond Perth and its surrounds and out to the State's unique regions.

Together with joint management partners, the parks offer opportunities for visitors to experience Aboriginal culture and heritage, offering a rich new lens through which to view Country.

The parks will make an important contribution to aspirations for WA to become the premier destination for authentic Aboriginal cultural tourism experiences, articulated in the State Government's *Jina: Aboriginal Tourism Action Plan 2021–2025*.

Opposite page

Top left Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park.

1) Quandong fruit (*Santalum acuminatum*).

2) Abrolhos Islands National Park is a breeding area for brown noddies (*Anous stolidus*).

3) New boardwalk at East Wallabi Island.

Photos – Samille Mitchell/DBCA

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4) Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), Ningaloo Marine Park. Photo – Craig Duncan **5)** Golden ghost crab (*Ocypode convexa*), Ningaloo.

6) Caravans on the beach, 14 Mile Camp, Ningaloo. Photos – Aberline Attwood/DBCA

7) Marine life at Ningaloo Reef. Photo – Samille Mitchell/DBCA



Matuwa Kurrara Kurrara National Park – largest ILUA in Australia

An ILUA signed in October 2022 with Tarlka Matuwa Piarku Aboriginal Corporation was the largest exclusive possession native title agreement in Australia and the largest for the creation of a new jointly managed and jointly vested conservation estate ever reached in WA.

It enabled the creation of the Matuwa Kurrara Kurrara National Park and nature reserve at Lake Carnegie in the remote Goldfields, adding more than 800,000 hectares to WA's conservation estate. The reserves protect Martu Aboriginal cultural heritage

values and the area's unique biodiversity and empower Traditional Owners to work on Country. Traditional Owners can also pursue tourism and other economic development opportunities in the new reserves.

Matuwa Kurrara Kurrara National Park was formerly two pastoral leases purchased by the State Government more than 20 years ago. It is also a dedicated Indigenous Protected Area with more than 480 plant species as well as the centre of one of Australia's biggest threatened animal translocation projects. Lake Carnegie is listed on the Commonwealth Directory of Important Wetlands, and is culturally significant to Martu Aboriginal people. It is also home to the elusive and critically endangered night parrot (*Pezoporus occidentalis*).



South coast marine protection

WA's south coast marine environment supports vast kelp forests, productive reefs and islands, and marine species found nowhere else such as the ruby sea dragon (*Phyllopteryx dewysea*). It is home to southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*) nursery areas and seal and sea lion colonies. Despite being globally recognised for its diverse marine life, until November 2024, less than one per cent of State waters on the south coast were protected as marine reserves.

Creation of the South Coast Marine Park has added approximately 1.3 million hectares to WA's marine park network making it the first oceanic marine park on the south coast. The marine park is comprised of four adjoining parks, the boundaries of which align with the Wagyl Kaip Southern Noongar, Esperance Tjaltjiraak, Ngadju and WA Mirning Native Title determination areas. Joint management of the parks is commencing with Wagyl Kaip Southern Noongar, Esperance Tjaltjiraak and WA Mirning Native Title holders. Joint management with Ngadju Native Title holders will be enabled through the Western Bight Management Plan.

The four parks collectively protect the incredible marine biodiversity of the south coast of WA and maintain its cultural heritage, while allowing sustainable fishing and activities such as diving, boating and tourism and will bring visitors and economic benefits to the area.





Gathaagudu – a global destination

Known in the Malgana language as Gathaagudu, Shark Bay is a World Heritage listed site, globally recognised for its cultural and natural values including dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) and stromatolites, and spectacular camping and recreation destinations like Steep Point and Zuytdorp Cliffs.

Under Plan for Our Parks, 183,000 hectares of new conservation areas have been created at Gathaagudu—the spectacular Edel Land National Park, Nanga National Park, Yaringa Nature Reserve and the Malgana portion of Pimbee Nature Reserve, all to be jointly managed with the Malgana Traditional Owners.

Edel Land National Park includes Steep Point, the westernmost point on the Australian mainland at the northern end of the dramatic Zuytdorp Cliffs, one of Australia's most renowned land-based fishing and remote camping spots.

Under the ILUA that facilitated the creation of the new parks, some of the State's most well known and beloved parks—Dirk Hartog Island National Park, Francois Peron National Park, Monkey Mia Conservation Park and Shell Beach Conservation Park—have also been jointly vested in and managed with the Malgana Traditional Owners, with four Traditional Owners to be employed to jointly manage Country.



LOOKING FORWARD

Every natural ecosystem works in balance. Plan for Our Parks has protected millions of hectares of precious natural assets while creating and strengthening partnerships with Traditional Owners, so

we can all share the many benefits of a beautiful natural environment.

It is providing transformative job, training and career development opportunities for Aboriginal people in all areas of land management.

The program has set a new benchmark for joint management of parks with Traditional Owners—it is the most successful native title agreement-making program for conservation ever undertaken anywhere in Australia.

The legacy of these changes will be experienced and appreciated for generations to come.

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Top left Matuwa Kurrara Kurrara celebration event. *Photo – Samille Mitchell/DBCA*

1) Night parrot (*Pezoporus occidentalis*). *Photo – Bruce Greatwich* **2)** ILUA celebrations at Matuwa. **3)** Southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*). *Photos – Peter Nicholas/DBCA* **4)** Sustainable fishing brings visitors to the south coast. *Photo – Tourism WA* **5)** South Coast Marine Park. *Photo – L-A Shibish*

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6) Shark Bay World Heritage Area. *Photo – Samille Mitchell/DBCA* **7)** Bottle Bay, Francois Peron National Park. *Photo – Chris Monagle Tourism WA* **8)** Thunder Bay, Edel Land National Park. *Photo – Carolyn Thomson-Dans*

Left Matuwa Kurrara Kurrara National Park. *Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA*

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