

# **Regional Partnerships for Conservation: The Example of Regional Parks in Western Australia**

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## **1. Origins of the Concept of Regional Parks**

The need to set aside Regional Open Space within the Perth Metropolitan Area was recognised by Stephenson and Hepburn (1955) when they drew up the first regional planning scheme in Western Australia. They foresaw a need to protect and manage large regional reserves of high conservation, recreation and landscape value, including the ocean beaches, the rivers and estuaries, the foreshores, the escarpment, central parks and areas of conservation significance. These regional open space reserves were to be multipurpose areas that met the needs of an entire region.

This concept was implemented, to some extent, in the 1960s and 70s via the creation of Bold Park and Whiteman Park by the WA Planning Commission. However, the work of George Seddon, who published several influential books, including *A Sense of Place* (1972), made people more aware of the unique biodiversity and character of the Swan Coastal Plain, including the Metropolitan Area. Seddon argued for a system of large conservation reserves that conserved the character of the Swan Coastal Plain and enabled people to enjoy it for recreation. He identified the coast, the offshore islands, the rivers and estuaries, the banksia and jarrah woodlands, the escarpment and the wetlands as the key landscape features that gave Perth its special character.

When the Environmental Protection Authority was established in 1972, it set up a series of studies called the Conservation Through Reserves Study to identify a comprehensive, representative set of reserves to conserve the flora and fauna of the State. The System Six Study focussed on the Swan Coastal Plain, between the escarpment and the coast, from the Moore River in the north to Dunsborough in the South. The System Six Study took up the Regional Open Space concept from Stephenson and Hepburn and the ideas of George Seddon and developed them into a set of proposals for Regional Parks, which would have multiple uses and could be managed by several agencies, coordinated by the State Government. The EPA made specific recommendations for Regional Parks, including locations and boundaries, in the System Six Red Book (1983) and suggested how they could be planned, funded and managed.

## **2. Implementation of the Concept**

In 1987 the WA Planning Commission commissioned a definitive study on the Corridor Plan for the Perth Metropolitan Area. (Neutze, 1987) It identified key areas of conservation, recreation and landscape significance and recommended that they be set aside for Regional Parks. The Plan aimed to protect key natural areas that had values of significance to the Perth Metropolitan Area, including the groundwater mounds.

In 1989 the Conservation Council, concerned about the lack of progress in establishing Regional Parks, published a set of recommendations for ten Regional Parks and this encouraged the Government to initiate planning to create three of them.

Eventually the planning was commenced for eight parks and in September 1997 the State Government set up a Regional Parks Unit (RPU) in the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM, now DEC) to manage them. The Regional Parks Unit was given the task of developing management plans for the eight parks listed in Table 1, establishing appropriate facilities and signage, amending land tenure arrangements and managing the parks in accordance with their intended uses. The RPU's recurrent funding is provided through DEC (CALM) and further capital funds have been provided by the WA Planning Commission from the Metropolitan Region Improvement Fund, to assist with the development of community infrastructure in the Parks.

The RPU subsequently set up community advisory committees (CACs) for each of the parks and began management and planning activities.

Name of Park	Location	Features
Herdsmar	Cambridge/Stirling	Wetland
Woodman Point	Cockburn	Coast and built heritage
Beeliar	Cockburn/Melville/Kwinana	Wetlands and banksia woodland
Jandakot	Cockburn/Armadale/ Kwinana/ Serpentine-Jarrahdale	Seasonal wetlands and banksia woodland
Yellagonga	Joondalup/Wanneroo	Wetlands
Canning River	Canning	River estuary
Rockingham Lakes	Rockingham	Wetlands and coastal vegetation
Darling Range	Swan/Kalamunda/Mundaring/Gosnells/Armadale/Serpentine-Jarrahdale	Escarpment and jarrah forest

**Table 1:** Perth's Regional Parks, locations and key features.

### Community Involvement in Regional Parks

Community groups played a major role in the development of the Regional Park concept and in the planning of the eight parks. The Conservation Council of Western Australia and several of its affiliated groups campaigned strongly for the Regional Park system in the years following the release of the System Six Red Book (1983) until the system was established in 1997. They continue to campaign today for further Regional Parks in the Perth Metropolitan Area and in the major regional centres of Mandurah, Bunbury, Busselton and Geraldton.

Since the Parks were established under the care of the RPU in 1997 community involvement has occurred in the following ways:

- (1) **Planning:** community members and NGOs have contributed to the development of management plans for each of the parks through their involvement in community advisory committees and via submissions on drafts of these plans. Community groups also continue to suggest possible extensions to the existing parks.
- (2) **Park Management:** community groups work closely with the RPU in monitoring and reporting incidents and locations that require attention. They also monitor

- flora and fauna and report fires or rubbish dumping to RPU or local government rangers. Most of the parks have one or more Friends Groups associated with them and they provide voluntary assistance to the RPU.
- (3) **Revegetation:** community groups are heavily involved in park maintenance and revegetation including planting, watering, weeding and rubbish removal.
  - (4) **Visitor Education:** the parks receive many thousands of visitors each week seeking a range of recreation and educational opportunities and experiences. Community groups have established environmental education centres in most of the parks where visitors and school groups can learn about the ecology and heritage values of the park. These centres also act as a base for community groups working on landcare projects in the Parks. Most of them are run by NGOs with financial support from local government, industry and the community.

### 3. Avenues for Community Involvement in the Parks

Community involvement in the Regional Parks is facilitated by a number of factors including the following:

- (1) **Regional Parks Grants:** community groups generally have an abundance of voluntary labour and a lack of financial resources. Recognising this, DEC has made available a small grants scheme of \$50,000 pa to assist groups wishing to work on revegetation, facilities or education projects in the Regional Parks. There are usually about 20 projects funded each year with the volunteer groups required to contribute labour and expertise in designing and executing the projects. The projects are reviewed by the RPU and the results are most impressive.
- (2) **Local Government and other grants:** funds provided by local government, industry and the NHT has been used by some groups to support their revegetation and environmental education efforts, particularly in the local government managed sections of the Regional Parks.
- (3) **Community Advisory Committees:** each of the eight Regional Parks has its own Community Advisory Committee which meets bimonthly to advise the RPU on the planning and management of the parks. The CACs consist of RPU staff, community representatives and local government officers and councillors, with an independent chairperson. These groups are useful forums for sharing ideas and information and the RPU uses them as a sounding board for its planning and management proposals. They also help to maintain constructive interaction between the various stakeholders in the Parks.
- (4) **Environment Centres:** some of the Parks have environmental education centres, run by community groups or local government, where volunteers can assist in environmental education, revegetation or special events such as conferences, seminars and workshops. Visitors also use these centres to obtain information about the Parks.

### 4. Strengths of the Model and Areas for Improvement

The establishment of the Regional Parks system has brought many benefits. It has improved the quality of landcare and provided avenues for the public to participate in the management of these urban bushland reserves. Public involvement has helped to create awareness and support for the concept and has reduced the incidence of arson and vandalism in the parks. This process has been assisted by the educational efforts of the RPU and the community groups, particularly via their web sites, displays, signage and publications. Through the Regional Parks Grants Scheme the RPU has been able

to effectively multiply the value of its funds through the engagement of voluntary labour and expertise and this has facilitated their education and revegetation work.

Through the CACs and the management plans an integrated management system has been put in place to cover large, fragmented areas of regional open space with a variety of owners and managers.

Despite these successes there have been some failures and shortcomings. In some of the parks, local government agencies have declined to participate fully in the spirit of cooperative management of the parks, especially where the parks are complex and involve several LGAs. In some of the parks valuable land has been excised for roads, marinas, pipelines, easements, schools and railways and other areas are under threat from opportunistic developers. Community involvement has helped to thwart many attempts by government and private interests to take over sections of the parks for their pet projects, but the lack of secure land tenure for the parks has made it easier for the developers.

Another frustration is that the Parks are not well-funded and, if it were not for the existence of funds from the Metropolitan Region Improvement Fund, their infrastructure needs would not have been met. The lack of recurrent funds has limited what can be done in planning and maintenance of the parks. However, with community assistance, the RPU has been able to maintain an impressive development program, despite restricted resources.

## **5. A Vision for the Future**

It is now more than 25 years since the concept of Regional Parks was formally proposed by the EPA in its System Six Green Book (1981). The Regional Parks system has now been established for a decade and we are able to judge the effectiveness of the concept. From this writer's perspective as a member of several NGOs and chair of a CAC for the past decade, it appears that the parks are widely supported and the RPU is highly respected for its work. Some of the major landscape features and ecosystems of the Perth Metropolitan Area have been protected via the Regional Parks system and valuable restoration and education work has been carried out.

There are still several key natural features of the Perth Metropolitan Area that need to be included in Regional Parks. These include the Wanneroo Lakes (Eastern Chain), the Gnangara Mound, the lower Serpentine River, the upper Canning River and the banks of the Helena River. Some of the existing Parks should be extended to include adjacent areas that have been identified through Bush Forever, particularly those over the Jandakot water mound. Some large nature reserves such as Leda and Forrestdale should also be included in adjacent Regional Parks to ensure that they are managed in an integrated and efficient way.

While it is acknowledged that land tenure changes are being made, the reserve status of these Parks needs to be expedited as soon as possible, to provide better protection.

The success of the Perth Regional Parks has led to proposals by community groups to establish regional parks in other urban centres such as Mandurah, Bunbury, Busselton, Moore River and Geraldton. Important natural areas have been identified and some planning has been done, but the question of funding has impeded their development. There is provision in the planning legislation for regional improvement funds but this has

proven to be a controversial issue outside the Metropolitan Area. This issue needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency before the opportunity to protect these areas is lost.

The community has also asked for more involvement in policy development and strategic issues affecting Regional Parks. There is currently no avenue available for this, although occasional meetings have been held between Regional Parks Chairs, RPU and DEC staff and Ministers. This is an issue that the Conservation Commission could address, perhaps through a Regional Parks sub-committee.

Community involvement in the eight existing Regional Parks is strong and ongoing. The model used by the RPU for community engagement has been very successful. Some improvements are possible and these should occur as the management plans are implemented. Communication, education and research plans need to be developed and implemented and these will provide excellent opportunities for community engagement.

Some community groups believe that the RPU should continue to manage the Regional Parks system, even after the parks are fully established, rather than transferring them back to the Swan Division of DEC. The reason for this is that Regional Parks are quite different in their composition and purpose to national parks and nature reserves and they require a special unit with excellent communication skills and a dedicated budget to manage them. Conservation in an urban environment is a complex business and it requires creative partnerships between the managers and the community if it is to succeed. The RPU has achieved this goal and the Regional Parks have truly become examples of government and the community working harmoniously to achieve conservation, recreation and aesthetic objectives.

## **6. References**

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