

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

For many years, much of the Rangeland's coastal area has been relatively isolated, with pastoralists and Aboriginal communities the major users of the natural environment. Figure 1.1 shows the location and extent of the Rangelands region. Since the 1960s, the expansion of mining activities and the development of associated road, rail, port and social infrastructure resulted in considerable population growth in the region. These developments improved the accessibility of the region resulting in a steady growth in the population and number of visitors. Expanded investment in tourism, and specifically nature based tourism, since the mid 1980s also promoted further population expansion and again improved the accessibility of the region for visitors.

While the Rangelands has long had contested heritage values (Indigenous/ pastoralists, squatters/ government), in more recent times the rapid increase in the number of individuals and industries using the region's resources has heightened the geographical expanse of, and political interest in, dissonant values and conflicting uses. Jones et al (2007, p. 92) commented, 'the debates and conflicts over the development and / or preservation of the... region clearly illustrates the differing views of the various protagonists on both the local environment and on the various heritages that it can be taken to represent'. Currently, the Rangelands coast has many uses, heritage values, economic values, social values and cultural values, which often spatially overlap. Uses include traditional Indigenous uses, pastoral, mining and commercial fishing activities, a variety of passive and active recreation activities, defence, communications and infrastructure, ports and environmental conservation. Indeed, the region contains some of Australia's largest mines and production facilities, busiest ports, Ramsar wetlands, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, national parks, significant collections of Indigenous rock art, productive pastoral stations and key defence and telecommunication posts.

Since the 1960s, in recognition of the social, economic and political implications of conflicting uses and values in the Rangelands region, successive Western Australian governments have provided resources for improved management and governance of the region's resources. In the first instance, efforts tended to be focused on establishing town and regional planning strategies and guidelines. During the 1970s, attention was also given to managing and protecting the ecological and aesthetic values of parts of the region's marine and coastal environment. Across the Rangelands region there are now policies, strategies and legislation guiding most aspects of development and regulating the spatial parameters and nature of most activities.

One activity that has continued to have only comparatively minor levels of management is coastal camping. Compared to activities such as mining and commercial or recreational fishing, management of coastal camping has been ad hoc and varies between local government jurisdictions. This low investment in management of coastal camping has been due to the perception that this activity has low levels of participation and minor impacts on the environment. Furthermore, much of the coastal camping occurs on 'private' land (pastoral leases) or unallocated crown land and therefore it has not been a priority of local governments who carry much of the land management responsibility.

However, following political and public pressure in the late 1990s and early 2000s to improve environmental protection measures for the Ningaloo Reef area, coastal camping.

Figure 1.1 Rangelands Region



shifted from being viewed as a largely low impact, culturally important activity to a potentially destructive activity. Indeed, the Department of Planning and Infrastructure (2003, p.6) commented 'While the number of visitors [to coastal camping sites] was small and negative impacts low... the laissez fair approach to coastal recreation use has resulted in some unsustainable user patterns and significant loss of marine and terrestrial values along some sections of the coastline'. The Department of Planning (2003) and Infrastructure (2003) recommended that all sites be managed, and camping in many remote locations be banned. The findings for that study underpin the current management approach to coastal camping as outlined in the *Ningaloo Coast Regional Strategy Carnarvon-Exmouth* (Western Australian Planning Commission, 2004) (also see *State Planning Policy 6.3 Ningaloo Coast*, State Government of Western Australia, 2007).

The findings from the Department of Planning and Infrastructure's (2003) study suggested that coastal camping in remote localities had the potential to undermine the ecological values of the terrestrial and marine environment. However, the nature, spatial extent and impact of coastal camping for the greater Rangelands area have not been comprehensively investigated. The lack of detailed baseline data presents a major challenge to management agencies in terms of designing effective and appropriate management arrangements.

1.2 Scope of this Study

This study sought to address the critical need for baseline data on the nature and spatial extent of coastal camping in the Rangelands. The study documented the nature of coastal camping along the Rangelands coast, from Carnarvon to the Dampier Peninsula (excluding Exmouth). The two core objectives of the study were to:

- Document the nature of coastal camping in the study area and identify possible implications for management.
- Identify, based on current user patterns, potential approaches to ensure coastal camping locations are effectively managed.

This study provides a critical resource for environmental managers seeking to enhance the effectiveness and geographic penetration of management and conservation efforts.

1.3 About Coastal Camping

The Rangelands coast is sparsely populated, with much of the land forming part of pastoral stations, mining leases or Aboriginal Reserve lands. For many years, residents of the region, other Western Australians and interstate travellers have sought out remote sections of the coast and established short (less than one week) to moderate term (up to four weeks) camps. Campers are usually self-sufficient, carrying their own water and power supplies. Campers usually participate in recreational fishing, bushwalking and wildlife observation. Campers value the isolation and the scenic beauty of remote camp sites and often have strong social attachments to particular campsites (Jones et al, 2007). Figures 1.2 and 1.3 illustrate typical remote coastal camps.

In addition to remote coastal camp sites, there are numerous caravan parks and regulated camping grounds. Caravan parks usually offer powered and unpowered sites, and cater for short term holiday makers, 'grey nomads', and long-term semi permanent or permanent residents. Regulated camping grounds usually provide campers with powered and unpowered sites, water supplies, toilets and rubbish disposal facilities and are frequently

visited by caretakers. Visitors to regulated camping grounds and caravan parks usually pay a per night per person fee. Tourism Western Australia (2009) reported that most travellers thought that caravan parks and regulated camp grounds in Western Australia were more expensive for the facilities provided than in other parts of Australia.

Visitors to caravan parks and regulated camping grounds tend to be 'Grey Nomads' or family groups, and tend to come from other parts of Western Australia or Interstate. During June, July, August and September caravan parks in the region often have an occupancy of over 60%. Visitors to remote camping locations tend to be residents from the region or residents from other parts of Western Australia. Largely, these campers are aged over 55, however in locations popular with surfers and windsurfers more young families and groups visit. Jones et al (2007) commenting on campers at remote locations, stated 'these are a predominantly Western Australian, and on balance, an elderly group who are passionately committed to this form of recreation.

Many of the individuals and family groups from the Rangelands region who visit remote camping locations do so on numerous occasions throughout the year. Indeed, many surfers from the Gascoyne and Pilbara region visit particular sections of the coastline between Carnarvon and Exmouth every few weeks. These individuals have a strong connection to those places, with many participating in site based informal environmental protection efforts. Many of the individuals and family groups from other parts of Western Australia who visit remote camping locations do so each year, and have developed strong social and cultural attachments to particular sites. Regular visitors frequently work with pastoralists on local revegetation and other environmental restoration projects (Jones et al, 2007). The contribution of campers to the regeneration and conservation of the natural environment has not been comprehensively recorded or quantified, however anecdotal evidence and time series site imagery suggests that in some locations this informal management has had a considerable impact in regenerating previously damaged sites and minimising future damage.

Since 2005, there has been a change in the demographic of visitors traveling to the area between Carnarvon and Exmouth. Traditionally, most visitors to this area have been residents of the region or other parts of Western Australia. In recent years, fewer 'traditional' visitors have been traveling to the region. Concurrently, a higher level of international tourists have been traveling to the region. This shift has been a direct outcome of the 2005 extension to the no-take zone (sanctuary) of the Ningaloo Marine Park, from 10% to 34%. How this change has impacted long established informal management regimes is unknown.

Coastal camping in the Rangelands region has long been, and remains, an important recreational activity for many residents of the region and also other parts of Western Australia. Coastal campers include recreational fishers, surfers, windsurfers, fly-in-fly-out workers, grey nomads and wildlife observers. The management of coastal camping sites

varies between jurisdictions, and in general most remote sites are largely unmanaged. Importantly, over the last decade there has been an increase in the number of campers participating in informal management and site restoration activities at many of these remote camping locations.

1.4 Methods

To collect baseline data on the usage of coastal camping sites researchers visited camping locations from the Dampier Peninsula to south of Carnarvon. The research team visited sections of the coast on four occasions, including:

- Five weeks between Carnarvon and Broome during August and September 2008
- Five weeks in the Kimberley region during October and November 2008
- Three weeks between Dampier Peninsula and Onslow during May and June 2009
- One week in the Carnarvon area during May 2009

During these field visits a rapid appraisal of the usage and environmental condition of camping sites was undertaken. Semi formal and informal interviews were also conducted with campers. The interviews centred on identifying social values of coastal camping and perceived threats to coastal camping. In total, over 200 people were interviewed as part of the study.

Stakeholder workshops and focus groups were also used to identify core social values associated with coastal camping in the region.

The results from the interviews, stakeholder workshops and focus groups were considered in the context of visitor and population trends sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and information obtained through a comprehensive literature review.

1.5 Structure of this Report

This report is structured into four chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two provides a summary of the nature of camping opportunities available in the study region. Discussion is structured into a number of sections, with each based on a statistical local area within the study region. Chapter Three describes core social values of coastal camping, noting social, economic and environmental impacts of coastal camping. Chapter Three outlines the characteristics of four broadly defined 'types' of campers and discusses the opportunities some of these 'types' present to future management efforts. Chapter Four draws together the key findings of the study, concluding with two proposals for how Rangelands NRM might have an ongoing role in the management of the coastal and marine environment through facilitating improved management of coastal camps.