

# Background Paper on Management, Facilities and Access

Prepared for the Stokes Inlet Steering Group March 2007  
includes notes provided by the  
Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC)

## **Introduction**

A management plan is being prepared for Stokes Inlet to ensure that its high environmental, social and economic values are managed sustainably into the future.

The community highly value the accessibility of Stokes Inlet and the facilities provided and managed within the Stokes National Park.

This background paper has been prepared using information provided by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC).

## **Background**

The land surrounding Stokes Inlet is part of the Stokes National Park and is managed by DEC. While many people visit the National Park to access the Inlet for fishing and general recreation, they access it through roads provided by DEC and use the facilities which are managed by DEC. When asked about values associated with the Inlet, the community often responded by discussing issues relating to the Park rather than the Inlet itself.

An Esperance District Coastal Reserves Management Plan (EDCRMP) is being prepared at present and will cover many of the questions raised within this background paper. As such, this paper has been prepared to provide information to the community and steering group about management facilities and access but will not include many recommendations as they will be handled through the DEC planning process. Instead suggestions have been included for discussion by the steering group.

## **Issues**

Community and organisational views on the Inlet, scientific information and available literature were used to determine what the priority issues are for Stokes Inlet. Questions were then developed on each issue with the expectation that the answers would provide a better understanding of the issue.

Below in italics are the questions that were raised in reference to management, facilities and access for the Inlet and surrounding National Park. These questions are answered and suggestions listed where appropriate.

## **Management**

DEC planning processes are underway which will influence the future vesting and management of the Inlet. It is expected that the new EDCRMP will recommend that the Inlet's tenure be changed so that it lies within secure conservation tenure of some sort. The 1994 Wilson Report which looked at Marine Reservation in WA suggested that Stokes Inlet be incorporated into a marine reserve. In the 1998 CALM report which looked at south coast terrestrial and marine reserve integration it was recommended that permanently or normally closed inlets should be considered for inclusion in surrounding terrestrial reserves, legal opinion required. Inspection notes from Stokes Inlet also recommend that the Inlet be included in the surrounding Stokes National Park.

*What stage is the District Coastal Reserves Management Plan (EDCRMP) plan at? What time frame is involved?*

The Issues Paper for the plan has been developed and approved by DEC's corporate Executive – it is now available on the DECWeb -at <http://www.naturebase.net/content/view/250/1238/>

The DEC Planner, who is writing the plan, Aberline Attwood, is seeking to have a draft Management Plan ready by the end of 2007 for circulation internally.

*Is it intended to include Stokes Inlet within the National Park or within the Marine Reserve system?*

All options will be considered, although the most favoured one is to include it in the park (the vesting could be either as national park or a 5 g reserve).

*What public consultation has been carried out as part of the coastal reserves planning process?*

Community workshops have been held in Munglinup, Esperance and Condingup. The Esperance Parks and Reserves Advisory Committee (appointed by the Minister) who are involved in the planning process comprises of community representatives from Munglinup (1), Esperance (4) and Condingup (1), Indigenous representatives (2) and a representative from both the Esperance and Ravensthorpe Shire Councils. There is only one DEC member (DEC Esperance District Manager – the Convenor) on this committee.

*What are the benefits associated with changing the vesting of the Inlet?*

The management of the inlet would become the responsibility of a specific responsible management agency (currently none) that would have to address all management issues (usage, threats, protection, monitoring, etc.) presence of on-site management capability.

*What impact would this change have on access and activities at the Inlet?*

There would be no impact for recreational purposes. The issue of ongoing commercial fishing would need to be addressed via public consultation.

*What barriers are there to changing the vesting of the Inlet (eg mineral sands)?*

Mining interests and commercial fishing.

*How can the Stokes Inlet management plan better integrate with the coastal reserves plan?*

It can recommend that the inlet be included in the national park, so that both public assets can be managed in an integrated way via the on-site presence of DEC staff.

**Suggestion:** the vesting of the Inlet is changed so that it is covered by secure conservation tenure.

*How many rangers are based at Stokes Inlet?* One permanent ranger, supported as required by other Esperance District staff (12). One additional seasonal ranger is employed within the park during the peak visitation/usage period. *Can the number be increased?* To be addressed in draft EDCRMP. *How often are the campsites inspected?* During the peak season 1-2 times daily, less though during the quieter periods.

**Suggestion:** steering group support the increase in the number of rangers in Stokes National park.

*What is the present fire management policy? Should control burns be increased?*

This is an EDCRMP plan issue – this issue is being addressed via that mechanism. Before control burns are undertaken many factors need to be considered. Increased fire protection strategies around key infrastructure (e.g. campsites) will be one key issue to be reviewed.

*How do the community presently have a role in the management of the Inlet and National Park?* The community has a role in the Parks management via the Esperance Parks and Reserves Advisory Committee.

*Is there a need to extend the Park into the farmland on the north-west side of the Inlet to better protect the Park and roads? Are there agreements that can be used to manage such areas?*

DEC is already actively involved with DOLI in pursuing the vesting of several unvested reserves abutting the Young River.

Should such an opportunity arise DEC is always prepared to assess and consider the suitability of any adjoining private property containing healthy remnant vegetation. However DEC is not currently seeking to extend the park into any farmland.

**Suggestion:** support the inclusion of unallocated crown land along the Young River into the Stokes National Park.

*How are indigenous values included in the Parks management?*

- DEC maintains a register of known aboriginal sites.
- DEC staff have received cultural awareness training and training in the recognition of aboriginal sites.
- DEC staff have forwarded information of previously unknown sites to the relevant indigenous heritage organizations.

- Within approved Interim Management Guidelines (internal management documents) which currently exist for all the key parks and reserves within the Esperance District are approved strategies and actions relating to the management of aboriginal sites.
- DEC Esperance District and the DEC Goldfields Region have had a formal MOU (memorandum of understanding) agreement with the Goldfield Land and Sea Council –in this agreement DEC acknowledges aboriginal sites and interests associated with DEC managed conservation reserves and the need to consult when such sites or interests might be directly or indirectly affected.
- Before any new initiatives or developments involving any site disturbance occurs DEC consults the relevant indigenous representative body (the Goldfields Land and Sea Council) and where necessary carries out site inspections with the TO's.
- Before commencing any new operations, including fuel reduction burns, DEC staff are required to complete an Environmental Check List, which includes a section relating to aboriginal sites and landscape values.

*Is there scope for a Noongar warden to work with DEC and represent the Traditional Owners view (equal say in country)?*

- DEC currently employs two indigenous trainees who are working towards a tertiary qualification – these trainees work across tenure, including within Stokes NP.
- There are currently two indigenous representatives on the Ministerial appointed Esperance Parks and Reserves Advisory Group.
- DEC and the Esperance District are also currently pursuing Treasury funding to establish a Cape Le Grand National Park Indigenous Heritage and Management Advisory Group. Once this group has been established and is functioning well, their role is anticipated to expand to include other key reserves within the district, including Stokes NP.

*Can Traditional Owners be granted free entry into the Park?*

Following the signing of an MOU between the CALM Esperance District and CALM Goldfields Region and the Goldfields Land and Sea Council in 2001, Peter Sharp (who is currently the Acting Director of Parks and Visitor Services) advised the Esperance District that DEC would exempt all TO's from having to paying park entry fees.

All Esperance DEC park staff, including gatekeepers, were advised of this directive via a formal written instruction from the Esperance DEC District Manager.

This issue has repeatedly been raised despite the fact that DEC have reaffirmed this position on every occasion.

The issue was again raised with DEC at two site meetings held in August 2005, one each at Cape Le Grand and Stokes National Park respectively, at which Allen Bullen, Henry Dabb, Doc Reynolds, Terry Yorkshire, Ellaine Bullen, Gail Yorkshire-Selby, Julie Dabb and Christine Dimer, Phil Drayson (GLSC), Eddie McKenzie (GLSC), Rita Elliot (GLSC) and Sarah Yu (consultant anthropologist) were present – the DEC position, that being that no TO's would be charged, was repeated.

Gatekeepers will however first ask, if the park visitor is associated with the Claimant area – if they say yes then access is freely given. Aboriginal people who do not have any association with the Claimant area (e.g. an aboriginal family on holiday from, say Sydney or Darwin) will however be charged an entry fee.

Note if that visitor is in a vehicle driven by a TO then no charge applies, it only applies if the visitor/s is/are in a vehicle by themselves and visiting independently.

Despite these DEC assurances, this issue continues to be raised by individual TO's, despite the fact that they have never been charged an entry fee.

During the 2005 Cape Le Grand Beach site discussion it was suggested that there was a need to develop a card/sticker to identify local people.

While there was agreement on this, the task of doing so was delegated to the GLSC. There has been no communicated progress on this.

*What recommendations should be included in this Plan to ensure management of the Inlet is improved?*

- Requires increased on-site management presence.
- Requires a monitoring program to determine state of health of the inlet, trends, threats, etc. (recommendations relating to this will be included in the flora and fauna background paper).
- Requires educational and interpretational material on site.

**Suggestion:** include ecological and historical European interpretative signage additional to indigenous signage along the proposed walk trail.

### **Facilities**

*How will the facilities be re-built after the fire?*

Following the recent wildfires in Stokes National Park DEC has set up a task review group comprising of DEC Esperance district staff, a DEC Planning Officer and DEC Recreation and Landscape Architects to look at the current and future recreational facilities needs on the western shore of the estuary. Any new facilities will be constructed to contemporary standards, which are higher than the previous ones. What facilities go where is yet to be determined as part of the task force review process.

*Is there a potential for showers in the future? This is a task review group /and EDCRMP plan issue. What would be the impact of these? Storage of waste water/soap suds would be required to prevent them draining into the estuary.*

*Are there plans to increase camping sites and BBQ areas? If so where will they be located? and can they be created without adverse impacts on the landscape? This is a task review group – the group includes DEC Recreation and Landscape Architects /and EDCRMP plan issue.*

*Have DEC considered building larger camping areas for larger family groups? All ideas will be considered as part of the process. There has not been any previous demand for group camping sites. Note: since that time information*

*passed on by the developing estuary management plans project officer suggests that the indigenous community have mentioned that they would like to see larger camping areas at the Park.*

*Is there a record of vandalism? It is rare. Is there a record of deliberately lit fires in the Park?* Not deliberate, but some unauthorized fires have been lit by park users (Note: DEC complies with the Shire of Esperance by law which imposes a total summer fire ban).

*Are there controls on noise levels (eg generators, radios) in the Park at present?* Yes there are, if they are required. Controls listed below:

- DEC Ranger staff can intervene via the CALM Act Regulations 2002, Sections 72 – 74.
- Section 72 – Authorized officer may direct person to stop activity
- Section 73 - Conduct generally
- Section 74 – Offensive Noise
- Each carries a penalty of \$500 for non-compliance.

*How do you manage visitor numbers? Is there an optimal visitor level?* Stokes Park visitation is currently considered low (16,000 visitors for the whole park). The main visitor impact appears to be during peak periods (Christmas and Easter holidays) when campsites can become full – this is self regulating as once the campsites are full, campers need to seek alternative accommodation elsewhere.

*What recommendations should be included in the management plan to ensure facilities are maintained or improved?* This is an EDCRMP plan issue – this issue will be addressed via that mechanism.

**Suggestion:** the steering group make a comment within the plan that they support a walk trail to the beach with interpretative signage.

### **Access**

*What are the existing and planned walk trails in the Park?*

The Stokes Heritage Trail is the only current existing walk trail. This runs from the northern campsite, and then above the inlet escarpment to near the southern campsite (at this point it becomes a return loop)

The option of extending this trail from near the southern campsite down to the beach is being considered.

*What is the required process to provide a walk trail to the beach/estuary mouth? Can such a trail be provided?* This is an EDCRMP plan issue – this issue will be addressed via that mechanism. *Is it possible to provide more look out points from the walk trail?* The existing Stokes Heritage Trail already included many areas with sweeping vistas over the inlet and eastern part of the park. Any extension of the path to the beach would take this into consideration.

*Can interpretative signs to display the cultural and natural values of the area be used on the walk trail?* Yes. Note: The existing Stokes Heritage Trail already included a number of interpretative plaques (unfortunately these were burnt in the fire).

*What is the maintenance program for roads in the Park?* This is an EDCRMP plan issue. Ranger staff drag the roads as required to reduce/remove corrugation. The roads are also graded twice yearly (such activity is reliant on weather conditions as the road surface requires some moisture before it can be effectively graded). *What are main influences on road condition (eg flooding, sediment, drainage)?* This is an EDCRMP plan issue – however all the above, plus extreme soil dryness for an extended period. *Can the road be surfaced?* It would be very expensive – several million dollars.

Note: The erosion and sedimentation of a tributary to the north -west of the park appears to be contributing considerable amounts of sediment to the park and appears to be one of the factors leading to the damage to the access road.

**Suggestion:** talk to the neighbouring north-western landholder about fencing off and revegetating the small tributary that enters the park at the north - western corner.

*Is it practical to construct a road to the beach on the west side of the estuary?* It would require the clearing of 2-3 km of paperbark vegetation and the removal of a sand dune near the inlet mouth– not environmentally or visually acceptable. *What impact on the park (vegetation, scenery etc) would such a road have?* Considerable impact and would entirely change the character of the place – it would also considerably increase visitation and require major additional infrastructure.

*What is the status of the estuary track along the western foreshore?* It is seasonal only as it is dictated by water levels in the estuary.

*Are 4wds causing damage to the sand dunes at the Inlet mouth?* It is highly likely that 4WD'S caused the original destabilisation of this dune, as the dune appears to attempt to regenerate itself when vehicle access is removed for extended periods (high water levels in the inlet prevent vehicle access to this area).

*Can this be controlled (eg through bollards)?* Partially, although requires regular policing. This has previously been implemented a number of times with limited success.

*What recommendations should be included in the management plan to enhance safe and considered access within the park?* This is an EDCRMP plan issue – this issue will be addressed via that mechanism.

**Suggested actions for Draft Management Plan as discussed with the steering group:**

**Suggestion:** the tenure of the Inlet and the Young and Lort River corridors (below the South Coast Highway) are of concern as they are UCL (Unallocated Crown Land), this needs to be addressed. There should be adequate resources associated with any change in tenure so that the land can be managed affectively.

**Suggestion:** the steering group supports the maintenance or increase in the number of rangers at Stokes National park.

**Suggestion:** an integrated interpretive signage plan for the park should be prepared and implemented.

**Suggestion:** the steering group support a walk trail to the beach with interpretative signage.

**Suggestion:** offer assistance to the landholder of the property to the north-west of the Park to revegetate and fence a waterway which flows into the north-western corner of the Park through the Young River Catchment Group.

**Suggestion:** Include a larger group campsite within the camping areas at the Park.

**References:**

Fitzgerald, M. E47 Stokes Inlet inspection notes. Department of Environment and Conservation (unpublished).

The Department of Conservation and Land Management. 1994. A Representative Marine Reserve System for Western Australia. Report of the Marine Parks and Reserves Selection Working Group. Also known as the Wilson Report.

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