

Synopsis of Information About the Walpole-Nornalup Inlet: A Candidate Marine Protected Area in Western Australia



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Nornalup-Walpole estuarine system is located 423 km south of Perth. It was identified as a candidate area for conservation by the Marine Parks and Reserves Selection Working Group (1994) due to its high conservation and recreational values. It is a unique system in that it is only one of two permanently open lagoon estuaries on the South Coast of Western Australia and contains the most diverse estuarine flora and fauna of any estuary in the region.

The estuarine system consists of the Nornalup estuary and the Walpole estuary, which are connected by a narrow channel. The shallower, and smaller Walpole Inlet is located to the north of the Nornalup Inlet. The estuarine environment and surrounding terrestrial environment are largely undisturbed and in pristine condition, partly due to the Walpole-Nornalup National Park which surrounds the estuarine system. Nutrient levels are low in the estuarine system compared to other south-west estuaries.

The wide variety of habitat assemblages, largely unmodified nature of the inlet and the fact that it is surrounded by a national park leads to the diversity and importance of the ecological communities in the area. The estuarine biota have strong Southern Australian affinities but with a significant endemic element. Walpole-Nornalup Inlet has an invertebrate fauna second only in diversity to Oyster harbour. Over 152 species of birds have been sighted in the area and 42 species of fishes identified in the inlet. The high species diversity can be attributed to the estuary being permanently open, unlike the majority of estuaries on the south coast. A recent benthic survey of the Walpole and Nornalup Inlets identified seven different benthic habitat types. These included sand flats, seagrass meadows and rock.

Currently there are approximately 450 people living in the town of Walpole. The region is coming under increasing pressure with a 33% growth rate over the last five years for residents and an even greater growth rate in tourism. With increasing demands being placed on the environment from population growth and tourism, the potential for degradation is high.

The Walpole and Nornalup Inlets are a key recreational fishing area being extensively used by recreational anglers. No commercial fishing of any sort takes place within the

Nornalup-Walpole Inlet, although commercial salmon fishing occurs along the adjacent coast during the months of February to April. Boating and surfing are other activities that are undertaken by locals and tourists on the estuarine and surrounding waters. Tourists are attracted to the region year round with peaks occurring during the warm summer months and the wildflower season of September to October. Nature based-attractions are one of the biggest drawcards which include the Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk and Bibbulmun Track.

The unspoilt nature and high diversity of the Walpole Nornalup Inlet system make it a worthy candidate for protection by the Department of Conservation and Land Management. Protection would aid in ensuring the long term future of the inlets as they come under increasing anthropogenic pressure.

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