BUSHLAND AND GARDENS

Only about one third of Kings Park has been developed, giving us one of its most treasured features; some 267ha of remnant bushland: home to 450 species of native plants and approximately 80 bird species and many other small creatures. Originally a tall open forest of Jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*), Marri (*Corymbia calophylla*) and Tuart (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*), the jarrah was heavily logged in the early days. Today, although tall trees are still to be seen, the bush is more a low, open banksia/sheoak (casuarina) woodland. Avenues, cycleways and paths allow access deep into the bushland. This is a wonderful experience any time of the year but especially in spring with the burst of wildflowers for which Western Australia is so well known. The Kings Park Festival is the annual celebration of this season.

The Botanic Garden was opened in 1965. Whilst it includes species from other Australian states and Mediterranean climatic regions, the main focus is on the stunning diversity of Western Australian flora. An artificial waterway winds through a gully and above soars the elevated walkway offering views of the gardens and the river from within the tree canopy.

CEREMONY AND SCIENCE

Over the years, Kings Park and Botanic Garden has developed a strong ceremonial role. The State War Memorial complex dominates Mount Eliza, providing a dramatic setting for ceremonies held throughout the year. Honour Avenues sweep through the park, each tree a living symbol of a life lost overseas in various conflicts.

There are many other memorials throughout the park honouring not only those lost in war, but those who have made a contribution to the development of the State. Less obvious, but of great importance, is the scientific role of the park. Kings Park and Botanic Garden is world-renowned as a centre for botanical research, plant development and the conservation of endangered species. Restoration and management of the park’s own bushland forms part of this program. The Biodiversity Conservation Centre liaises with similar organisations throughout the world such as the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew in England.

Much has happened since those early days of Nyoongar firesticks. The sounds of traditional Nyoongar dance may still be heard in the park and the call of the bugle at the Cenotaph at dawn on ANZAC Day confirm the ceremonial role continues. Visitors still picnic and promenade but in a more casual style whilst recording their view is more likely achieved with a camera and tripod than a paintbox and easel. The escarpment still provides vantage points for viewing events on the river. Rather than a regatta, today’s visitors gather to watch the Australia Day fireworks.
The area we know as Kings Park and Botanic Garden has been a part of Aboriginal history since earliest dreamtime. For thousands of years Kaarta (hill/head) Gar-up, (water-place of) has been one of the many names Nyoongar people used for the land at the top of the escarpment now known as Mount Eliza. Kaarta Gar-up and adjacent areas were places of ceremony and shelter, places of food – whether hunting the kangaroo or searching for the succulent roots and fruits of ‘bush tucker’ – and places for tool making and teaching.

Aboriginal people would have been astounded at the appearance of strange white beings along the river. The Dutch, under Willem de Vlamingh, made exploratory forays in 1697, the French followed in 1801, but it wasn’t until the English under Captain James Stirling arrived in 1827 that serious consideration was given to the establishment of a settlement. Stirling returned two years later to set up the Swan River Colony.

The bushland at the top of the escarpment was a favourite picnic spot and playground for the early settlers, and many an aspiring artist sought to capture the image of the fledgling town of Perth below and the unfamiliar wildflowers within.

We know the fresh water spring at the foot of Mount Eliza as Kennedy Fountain. To the Nyoongar this was Goonininup, site of the base camp for the clan of Yellagonga, an indigenous leader at the time of early settlement in the 1830s. This was the home of the Waugal, the rainbow serpent that meandered through the landscape creating waterways on its journey from the hills to the sea. This story of the creation of the Swan River underlines the spiritual link between the Nyoongar people, the land and the water.

Terraces wound down the escarpment through gardens and groatios, providing excellent views of the esplanade held on Perth Water below. Park visitors might alight from horse and carriage and walk up Main Drive (now Fraser Avenue), or take a tram from the city. Some would arrive by ferry or private yacht at Point Lewis; perhaps to walk up the terrace to the nearby teahouse (relocated to the western side of Fraser Avenue in 1919). It is still very much a park for families with playgrounds, cafés, picnic spots and venues for private celebrations. Musical and dramatic performances and open air cinema are held on summer evenings.