

LEEWIN–NATURALISTE NATIONAL PARK — VISITORS

Grievance

MS E.J. KELSBIE (Warren–Blackwood) [9.27 am]: I rise today to raise a grievance with the Minister for Environment; Climate Action concerning our much-loved Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park and I thank Minister Whitby for taking my grievance. Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park stretches from Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse in the north to Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse in the south, from Bunker Bay to Augusta in my electorate of Warren–Blackwood. The national park is home to glorious beaches, beautiful forests, awesome surf breaks, limestone caves and rugged coastline. It is an iconic tourist destination with many “Insta-worthy” spots, including Injidup Spa and Boranup Forest, along with the many caves available to explore.

It is WA’s most visited national park, with 4.6 million visits last year. Let us put that into perspective and compare those 4.6 million visits with other national parks in Western Australia. Data from 2020–21 shows that Purnululu or the Bungles had just under 20 000 visits; Cape Le Grand, just over 200 000; Kalbarri, just under 480 000; Torndirrup, just under 500 000; and Karijini, just over 500 000. Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park had over 4.6 million visits in a year. That is a lot of people.

I recently attended the inaugural Capes Coastal Forum in Margaret River, hosted by Nature Conservation Margaret River. It was an excellent opportunity to hear from the individuals and organisations that work to care for our coastline. It was awesome to be part of an ongoing conversation about how, as a community, we can work together to maintain, protect and preserve our coastline into the future. It was an inspiring event full of optimism, but it also shone a spotlight on the threats to Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park, including invasive species, feral animals, erosion, climate change, habitat loss, uncontrolled fire and the impacts of humans.

Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park is home to the famous Cape to Cape Track—a trail that runs along the Leeuwin–Naturaliste Ridge. The Cape to Cape Track is an iconic tourism trail, which attracts people from across the globe and which I hope to complete one day. Looking after the track is tiring work—so the tireless Friends of the Cape to Cape Track tell me! It is an incredibly dedicated volunteer organisation that assists the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions rangers with upgrades and maintenance of the track, including helping with construction and repair of sections of the boardwalk, stairs, and bridges.

It has been said before that the park may be in danger of being loved to death, and I want to be part of a solution whereby we provide support and services to help sustain and protect the health and biodiversity of this amazing part of my electorate. It is one of the best natural assets and tourist destinations in the south west. The park is a destination where tourism operators and traditional owners have a mutual respect for “tread lightly” experiences that pay respect to Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park. I have been working alongside the Shire of Augusta–Margaret River, local volunteer organisations, DBCA representatives, local tourism operators and the Margaret River and Busselton Tourism Association to listen, learn and advocate for a sustainable future for Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park.

I know we are adding five million hectares to the conservation estate through our Plan for Our Parks initiative, taking action on climate and ending native logging in the south west, but I want to know what we are doing for the iconic Cape to Cape Track. I am proud to be part of the McGowan Labor government and I am passionate about being a champion for the local environment across Warren–Blackwood. I know the minister has been to the region on multiple occasions and people have been in direct contact with him, and I thank him. Today I ask the minister to please provide an update on what we are doing to help secure a sustainable future for this much-loved and iconic tourist destination.

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldivis — Minister for Environment) [9.32 am]: I thank the member for Warren–Blackwood for her impassioned plea. She is a member after my own heart. We both share a deep passion and love for Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park. I, my family, nieces and nephews are often numbered in that 4.6 million. We would probably be counted a couple of times. The member is right; there is a danger of this most loved national park being loved to death by the frequency of visitation and the fact that it is in a part of the world where people often do not even realise that they are in a national park because of the layout and form of the park. I just want to address the member’s concerns and I pre-empt that I have some excellent news for her today—in no small part due to her advocacy. This is exciting and good news for one of Western Australia’s treasured natural assets.

First and foremost, I want to thank the member for her advocacy and strident ambition for her electorate. There is no greater advocate for change in the south west than the member for Warren–Blackwood. The member has been described as a force of nature by many people I run into in that part of the world. The people of Warren–Blackwood are truly lucky to have her as their representative.

In partnership with my colleague the Deputy Premier and Minister for Tourism, I am pleased to inform the house of major upgrades for our beloved Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park. Under the McGowan government’s national

park tourism experiences development program, we will invest \$2.7 million in upgrades to the Cape to Cape Track. This project will both repair the track and improve visitor signage within the park. Only earlier this year, I was on a section of the track and I know it can be quite challenging. The track has been weathered and some of those signs are pretty hard to read, if they are there at all.

As the member pointed out, last year alone the park attracted more than 4.6 million visits, serving as a testament to its unrivalled beauty, boasting the pristine beaches we know well, captivating limestone caves, enchanting forest walks and a picturesque coastline that takes one's breath away—that is a very accurate description. The member for Warren–Blackwood has been a central player in this announcement. Her unwavering support for and dedication to preserving our natural surroundings has been instrumental in realizing these improvements to the Cape to Cape. I want to thank the member once again.

Make no mistake, Madam Speaker, this will ensure that this iconic trail remains a popular hiking destination, for not only locals, but also visitors from far and wide. Cabinet heard directly from the constituents of Warren–Blackwood when we visited there in November last year. We heard well and truly from that community meeting that members of the community wanted improvements to their trail. The phrase “the danger of being loved to death” was mentioned a number of times. I have some good news today: we listened to those concerns and today we are delivering.

To further enrich the experience for hikers and protect our valuable environment, we have allocated \$2 million to the 125-kilometre Cape to Cape Track. These funds will facilitate a range of improvements, including enhancing the track's surface, upgrading essential infrastructure, realigning the trail to safeguard culturally sensitive sites and implementing effective erosion management strategies. In addition, \$700 000 will be allocated to enhancing visitor signage, ensuring that all who venture can navigate the wonders of this trail with ease. I take immense pride in stating that this funding is part of the McGowan government's comprehensive \$17.7 million national park tourism experiences development program. We are committed to the development of new, environmentally sensitive tourism experiences within our national parks. It is through initiatives like this, alongside our visionary plan for our parks, as the member mentioned, that we strive to enhance and activate our conservation estate, protecting our environment for generations to come.

The Cape to Cape Track is an essential pillar of our south west region's tourism appeal. With these significant upgrades, we aim to secure its position as a premier tourist destination for many years to come. As we invest the \$2 billion into track enhancements and the \$700 000 in visitor signage, we are creating not only remarkable tourism experiences, but also valuable employment opportunities. By enticing more visitors to explore the wonders of Western Australia, we contribute to the growth of our local economy. Once again, I want to thank the Deputy Premier and Minister for Tourism Cook for supporting this project. I again commend the unwavering efforts of the member for Warren–Blackwood. She is passionate and has the ability to listen to her local community and respond to their appeals. Together, we are ensuring that Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park remains a source of pride for our great state and a testament to the beauty and ecological importance of Western Australia's natural wonders. I notice the member for Vasse and Leader of the Liberal Party has just entered the chamber. She is no doubt very much appreciative of these improvements to the national park in her electorate also. Thank you very much.