

**DONNELLY RIVER HUTS**

Mouth of the Donnelly River  
South Coast of Western Australia  
Manjimup and Nannup Shires

**PROPOSAL to LIST the *DONNELLY RIVER MOUTH - HUT PRECINCT*  
as a PLACE of CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE**

Alan Lush  
For Lower Donnelly River Conservation Association (Inc)  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This is a proposal to list the Donnelly River hut precinct at the mouth of the river, on the south coast near Pemberton, as a place of cultural heritage significance. It has been a holiday destination continuously for almost one hundred years for up to four generations of local families. It is unique for several reasons including the fact that no access is possible by car.

Early non-aboriginal activity on the coastal plains of the south coast of Western Australia, in the vicinity of the mouth of the Donnelly River, was grazing under pastoral lease from late 1800s. Lease holders were mainly landowners of the hinterland and from pioneering families who moved cattle to coastal leases for summer grazing. Coastal leases either side of the Donnelly were held originally by Bussell and Scott families and later by Scott, Giblett and Brockman families who had huts for camping but not at the river mouth. Bolganup hut, formally rated as having high heritage significance, still exists six kilometres south of the boat landing that is twelve km upstream of the river mouth.

The original huts at the mouth of the Donnelly River appears to have been built in 1934 as holiday accommodation since reference to earlier holiday visits describe ti tree shelters, tents and canvas covered structures but no huts. Although three huts existed by December 1934 most were built in the period 1950-75. 43 huts currently exist and are tenured under lease with the *Department of Conservation and Land Management*, since the land is *National Park* vested in the *Conservation Commission of Western Australia*. At least ninety percent of the huts are owned by residents of the shire of Manjimup.

All huts were “owner built” using various materials, mostly salvaged from other dwellings, and are used on weekends and holidays. “Camping” is the vernacular and the precinct has been a camp site since original pastoral lease times. Huts were constructed long before the area was reserved for the purpose of National Park.

The Donnelly River hut precinct is absolutely unique. Access to the mouth is by boat and numerous anecdotes describe rowing and poling various structures for hours and days to transport holiday makers and building materials downstream. In 1922/23 the *Progress Association of Manjimup* raised money for two boats that were moored at the landing for communal use and a similar one still exists and awaits restoration.

“Squatter huts” were a National phenomenon in many situations, especially coastal, and few remain today. Without protection of their heritage value in selected places it will be lost forever.

## 2. IDENTIFICATION

### REFERRED BY:

**Name:** Lower Donnelly River Conservation Association  
**Address:** Secretary D Fouracres, RMB 20, Manjimup, WA, 6258  
**Telephone:** 9777 0450 (w), 0427 996 001 (m)  
**Email:** [debbie.fouracres@health.wa.gov.au](mailto:debbie.fouracres@health.wa.gov.au) (w)  
**Date:** 3 May 2006

Has owner/occupier been consulted?

YES, hut owner questionnaire November 2004, and committee and owner meetings.

Dept. Conservation and Land Management

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Debbie Fouracres  
Secretary

### 2.1. Place Details

**Name of Place:** Donnelly River Mouth – Hut Precinct

**Address/Location:** Mouth of the Donnelly River, 35 km west of Pemberton

**Local Government Authority:** Shires of Manjimup and Nannup

**Map Reference:** Precinct location – see map, attachment 1 (a)

Hut sites – see map, attachment 1 (b)

**Area of Site:** Approximately 26 ha (assuming 100m either side of river)

### 2.2. Ownership and Other Site Details

**Owner Name:** Precinct managed by *Department of Conservation and Land Management*. Huts owned by individuals.

**Address (CALM):** Executive Office, Hackett Drive, Crawley 6009

**Phone:** (08) 9442 0300      **Email:** [calm@wa.gov.au](mailto:calm@wa.gov.au)

**Reserve Details:** *D'Entrecasteaux National Park*

**Vesting:** *Conservation Commission of Western Australia*

**Public Accessibility:** Open, and subject to the Park management plan

**Lease Details:** Hut occupancies are managed through occupancy leases

## 3. PARTICULARS of the PLACE

**Dates:** Use of the wider area began with pastoral leases late 1800s. Use of the Donnelly River Mouth Precinct as a holiday destination began 1910s (est), with hut construction beginning mid 1930s (data sourced through questionnaire to current hut owners, *pers comm* with descendents and Association newsletters).

**Type of Place:** 9632 Precinct (subject to Heritage Council confirmation)

**Use of Place:** Holiday accommodation (original and current)

Architect/Designer/Builder: All huts are owner built structures

Description: The precinct consists of 43 huts constructed on either side of the Donnelly River between 300m and 1.3 km upstream of the mouth. Huts are semi-conspicuous within natural surrounds and all access to the precinct is by boat from a landing 12km upstream.

## 4. HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

### 4.1. Aesthetic Value

**Criterion 1: It is significant in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.**

The Donnelly River, from boat landing to the Southern Ocean, is significant for its naturalness, especially given that it has been a public recreational (holiday) area continuously for almost 100 years.

The first section, from landing to hut precinct, is a completely natural landscape, other than an occasional river marker (attachment 2). Hut owners refer to “magic” occasions when the river provides perfect reflections to the extent that reality and reflection cannot be distinguished along the bank and boat navigation becomes awkward.

The hut precinct (second section) contains 43 huts and although most can be seen from the river they are not imposing with few “stand-outs” (attachment 3 - photos 1-4.). Most huts only become apparent when boaters are adjacent to them and the Association of hut owners is very sensitive to this aspect of the area. Owners are willing to accommodate changes to reduce any discordant visual impact.

Predominant descriptors of the hut precinct are naturalness, unimposing, tranquil, rustic and casual, and a time-warp.

Vistas along the river in the vicinity of the huts are predominantly natural, containing small jetties and moorings that arguably add interest. Few huts are conspicuous from this perspective and none exist in close proximity to the river mouth and associated cliff and beach (attachment 4).

### 4.2. Historic Value

**Criterion 2: It is significant in the evolution or pattern of the history of Western Australia**

The lower Donnelly River area represents original European use of southern coastal areas in Western Australia and is unique in that its original condition is still very evident. Pastoral leases and coastal recreation were dominant uses.

#### Pastoral Leases

Leases for cattle grazing were granted to pioneer farming families including Bussell of the Vasse area and Scott of Nannup (1861<sup>1</sup>). Later ownership became Giblett of Manjimup, Scott of Nannup and Brockman of Pemberton (attachment 5). Cattle were typically moved to coastal areas for summer grazing before returning to inland properties. The area remained in a largely natural condition during grazing and remains relatively unchanged today.

The Jesse Giblett family built a dairy on their lease in the vicinity (locally known as the *Stone Hut*) and produced butter and cheese that was sold or bartered

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<sup>1</sup> JP Gabbedy, Unpublished manuscript.

locally and further a field<sup>2</sup>, including to whalers at Quindalup (nr Dunsborough). William Scott recalled how, after the building was complete, the contract price of 100 sovereigns was counted out for (the builder) on the kitchen table of the Scott home<sup>3</sup>. Traces of this building remain but are mostly destroyed by fire, vandals and weather.

The *Bolganup Hut*, six km south of the boat landing, is one of the last remaining pastoral lease "camps" in the area and has been formally assessed for its heritage value. It was another Giblett structure, is classified as having high heritage significance, but is considered to be at serious risk of loss from fire due to its isolation and lack of site maintenance. Local Giblett descendents are keen to preserve this building and an opportunity to protect it is available by relocating it, possibly to the Donnelly hut precinct. Preliminary enquiries indicate that this can be accomplished with assistance from Rotary and Apex service clubs in Manjimup and Pemberton and a separate proposal on this matter is being submitted to CALM.

### Coastal Huts

Huts at the mouth of the Donnelly River are very significant for the way they represent early coastal recreation in regional WA. They display some of the last expression of this state-wide phenomenon of a semi permanent coastal holiday structure. The area is unique compared with other areas where huts have been either removed or overtaken by development.

The mouth of the Donnelly River has been used as a holiday destination continuously for almost 100 years by families of the surrounding countryside, mostly from Pemberton and Manjimup (photos 1 & 3, attachment 6, and attachment 6(b)). Its history as a camping area has strong links to the original group settlement scheme (1920s) and to a lesser extent the Great Depression years (1930s) when sustenance workers from nearby camps worked two days each week and spent much of their remaining time at the coast<sup>4</sup>.

Early recollections include those of Brian Hornby:

My father Harry Hornby rowed down in 1916 in a boat hired from Don McKay<sup>5</sup>;

Brian Hornby also recalls his father describing all the tents that were everywhere during some of the depression years. People had time on their hands and many camped down the Donnelly and ate fish and marron, possums and ducks<sup>6</sup>.

Nora Palmer<sup>7</sup> writes:

Round about 1922-23 Manjimup had a progress association of which my father, Don McKay, was President. They raised money and bought two boats which were left at the landing near Scotts block (two miles upstream from the present boat ramp). One of these boats was named "The Annie" after my mother.

These boats were for anyone who wished to have a holiday at the Donnelly mouth. Of course they had to row the 10 miles as no one had motors.

In about 1923-24 Don McKay and family in one boat, and Ike Doust and family in another, rowed down the river for a holiday. They camped in a ti tree shelter which was available to all. It was in a gully near to where Chadwick's hut is today.

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<sup>2</sup> Hon HD Evans, Unpublished manuscript, "The Unique Story of Manjimup".

<sup>3</sup> William Scott, Oral account, 1938

<sup>4</sup> Hon HD Evans, Pers comm, 15 Dec 2005

<sup>5</sup> Brian and Yvonne Hornby, Questionnaire response, December 2004

<sup>6</sup> Brian Hornby, Pers comm, November 29, 2005 during fact finding and photography visit

<sup>7</sup> Nora Palmer, Email "The Mouth of the Donnelly River, 29 March 2005

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I remember it well as I was 7 years old at that time. I remember eating mouldy bread – that sticks in my memory.....

...I believe that the Dick family had a holiday even before us. They stayed two weeks, ran out of food and shot crows to eat.

and Roy Ockwell<sup>8</sup>:

The Goddard brothers used to have a permanent tent frame pitched in the early thirties and gradually constructed the hut I have today.

From the *Blackwood Times*, Friday May 18, 1923:

Manjimup

To raise funds for the "Donnelly River Pleasure Resort" a children's plain and fancy dress ball was held in the hall on Friday evening. There was a large attendance. The children were in many cases handsomely dressed. Prizes were won by Arthur Oliver, Daisy Martin, Clifford Goldron, Mary Barry, Fred Mansfield and Olive Campbell.

Hardships of the group settlement and depression eras, along with an inability to afford more than essentials, poor transport and remoteness from coastal towns meant that holidays were taken locally. Places like Peaceful Bay, Walpole, Windy Harbour and the Donnelly River mouth were a few places that had access to the south coast and that could be afforded.

Since access to the mouth of the Donnelly River was by boat they were launched and retrieved at "boat landing". Many boats remained moored at the landing (photos 2 & 4, attachment 6) since they were heavy and difficult to remove and in 1956 a hand winch was donated and installed to pull boats (and cars) up the slippery bank.



The area was closely linked to neighbouring pastoral leases of the time and hut owners refer to the early practice of informing lessees of stock movements in the vicinity, and feed condition<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Roy Ockwell, Questionnaire response, February 2005

<sup>9</sup> W E Gardner, Letter, 30 September 2004

Donnelly River huts represent an era of scrounging and innovation, and toilet and fire place construction draw considerable interest from visitors (photos 5 & 6, attachment 3).

#### 4.3. Scientific Value

**Criterion 3A: It has demonstrable potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of the natural or cultural history of Western Australia.**

Hut owners of the Donnelly provide a unique opportunity to yield information on the value of community cooperation and commitment for sustainable management of a public area.

The hut precinct represents an area of limited camping and “settlement” for a continuous period of almost 100 years with little adverse environmental impact. In fact, evidence shows that substantial environmental improvement has occurred as a result of an ongoing hut owner presence. Hut owners action to re-vegetate bare areas, to reticulate water to encourage development of seedlings, and management of accumulated plant debris to protect against fire has resulted in extensive regrowth of native vegetation (attachment 7(a) - photos 1 & 2 of hut 14, and photo 3 for nearby vegetation). The progressive introduction of other plants has also led to stabilization of sand dunes adjacent to the river mouth (see attachment 7(b) – Rehabilitated Sand Dunes).

Local knowledge and resources of hut owners has assisted scientific study and will continue to do so. Records to demonstrate instances are attachments 8(a) and 8(b), and enquiry with CALM's Pemberton office will confirm more recent and frequent assistance.

Given that tourism is rapidly developing in the Lower South West region, and active promotion of the Donnelly has begun (*Donnelly River Cruises* - attachment 9), the precinct presents an opportunity to test alternative recreational management strategies, including “controlled access”, and to be used as a benchmark against which to measure other more developed sites.

Long term hut owner presence has had a substantial and a very positive “caretaking” impact. Littering and environmental vandalism is non-existent and control of un-natural breaching of the seasonal sand bar across the mouth by visitors has been stopped by hut owners on many occasions. The hut precinct is unique within a range of different coastal camping opportunities in the *D'Entrecasteaux National Park*, and provides long term evidence for comparative research on many subjects including visitor impact.

**Criterion 3B: It is significant in demonstrating a high degree of technical innovation or achievement.**

The hut precinct demonstrates some degree of technical innovation and achievement, although not high. Its value lies in the fact that much of it has remained immune to modern technological developments - it is a “refugee” from them. Owners demonstrate the kind of innovation that typified early settlers by adapting and making do with whatever materials were available. Cooking and ablution facilities, septic systems and lighting arrangements are a few examples of innovation that can still be found, although modern power generators, solar panels and bottled gas are becoming more prevalent.

#### 4.4. Social Value

**Criterion 4: It is significant through association with a community or cultural group in Western Australia for social, cultural, educational or spiritual reasons.**

##### Sense of Community

Owners of huts in the precinct have a highly developed sense of community (photos 1, 2 attachment 10). Their support to each other is exceptional and becomes extended towards visitors whenever the opportunity is seen. Innumerable examples can be found and include provision of shelter and water to campers, supply of fuel and assistance to stranded boat owners, action to deal with emergencies and inclusion of visitors in communal activities.

Ongoing communal work includes survey for and eradication of arum lilies (noxious weed), baiting for feral animals, assistance with fire prevention and control, construction and replacement of public boat ramp (four times) and jetty (photos 3-5, attachment 10), and rubbish collection and disposal.

Assistance to CALM includes construction of board walks across fragile sand dunes, eradication of noxious weeds, development of facilities at the boat landing, and hut and site inspections.

Evidence of a strong sense of community is ample.

##### Public Service

The area has been identified by the *Australian Customs Service* as a potential entry point for undesirable activity along WA's isolated south coast. Hut owners have been briefed on requirements of the *Coast Watch* program and provide a public service through their awareness and regular presence.

More active public service in the form of environmental caretaking, in addition to assistance to CALM and other works, is readily apparent from the absence on vandalism and littering. It is also present through willing assistance to visitors in distress.

##### Wider Community Support

Although the Donnelly hut owner group is small there is strong and wide community support for maintaining huts as they are, without upgrade to contemporary building standards other than for essential safety and hygiene reasons. Letters from community groups and recognised local identities are evidence of this.

##### Longevity and Exclusivity

Most huts were constructed well before a National Park was declared but have been managed under lease arrangements since c1985. Many families are now third and fourth generation campers of the Donnelly and demonstrate a significant history of camping – they hold a wealth of oral history and display wonderful extended family bonding that is the envy of many (Photo 2, attachment 10).

An impression of “exclusivity” may be formed with a Government policy of banning new huts however existing huts make the Donnelly inclusive. Current arrangements enable camping to range from individuals and small groups to extended families, including babies and small children, elderly and disabled, whereas removal of huts will exclude extended families. Without the huts, camping is likely to revert to backpackers and small groups only; young families, elderly and disabled will be excluded.

### Environment for Creativity

It is apparent from returned hut owner questionnaires that the precinct is a place of rest and solace for many. This can be illustrated with two of many poems from campers (attachment 11 – poems *Another Time* and *The Donnelly*).

### Tourism

Travelling to the mouth of the Donnelly River has never been promoted publicly until recently. *Donnelly River Cruises* commenced a tourist venture in 2005 (attachment 9) and according to the proprietor is growing in popularity. He states that passengers are intrigued by the huts and that sentiment towards them is overwhelmingly supportive.

## 4.5, 4.6 Rarity and Representativeness

**Criterion 5: It demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the cultural heritage of Western Australia.**

**Criterion 6: It is significant in demonstrating the characteristics of a class of cultural places or environments in the State.**

### Western Australia

The *Donnelly River Mouth – Hut Precinct* is unique. It is rare since no other coastal locality has retained its historical characteristics to the same extent in such an unusual location. Its restricted access (by boat only) has limited its development and it represents an era of coastal camping by families that was common on the west and south coasts of Western Australia but now almost extinct.

The Government of WA developed a uniform policy on coastal shacks to address an “out-of-hand” problem, mainly north of Perth:

*Squatters put up shacks on the coast between Moore River and Dongara at the rate of two a week. The controversial issue is now being investigated by three government groups with the aim of introducing a uniform policy on shacks*<sup>10</sup>

*There are more than 700 shacks on the WA coastline, used by fishermen who mainly seek crayfish and by people who just want to get away from it all.*

*About 250 shacks have been erected in the Dandaragan Shire and 350-400 in the shires of Irwin, Carnamah and Coorow.*

*The three biggest sites are Wedge Island, Green Island and Sandy Cape.*

*..... Good sheltered spots along the coast are limited, leading one man to say “You cannot find a decent place for a picnic any more, unless you park behind a shack and walk through others to the beach”*<sup>11</sup>.

The policy has been to remove squatter shacks and almost all have now gone<sup>12</sup>. Other coastal camping sites from early 20<sup>th</sup> century have been developed as townsites and or formal caravan and camping areas (numerous on West Coast north and south of Perth, and along the south coast).

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<sup>10</sup> *The Wild Idyll*, Michael Zekulich, *The West Australian* newspaper, March 22, 1986

<sup>11</sup> *Officialdom closes in on the shacks*, *The West Australian* newspaper, March 22, 1986

<sup>12</sup> Pers comm Meryl Nolan, Shire of Gingin (6 remaining adjacent to owners property), Ian Rennie, Shire of Dandaragan (none remaining).

There are few squatter dwellings along the south coast between Walpole and Esperance. A few isolated huts exist east of Albany and are associated with professional fishermen<sup>13</sup>.

Many huts still exist at one notable site - Wandine, south of Mundrabilla on the Eyre Hwy in the Dundas Shire. This site is notable for its size (number of shacks) and difficulty (isolation, individuality and poor hygiene). Shack owners come from the Eastern Goldfields, Esperance and various locations in South Australia and although the issue will eventually be addressed the local authority appears daunted by management prospects<sup>14</sup>.

#### New South Wales

The social phenomenon of building shacks on the coast as a fishing and holiday retreat, and building them in other desirable locations such as alpine highlands, has been widespread throughout Australia. At the same time, the practice has been stopped and most structures have been removed due to uncontrolled expansion and undesirable conditions in many places.

Few representative samples of the phenomenon remain in Australia but one that does is in the *Royal National Park of New South Wales*. Huts at *Era and Burning Palms* are listed by the National Trust, *Era* and *Little Garie* are listed by the *Australian Heritage Commission* and all are listed in the *Wollongong Council Heritage Study* (attachment 12 – *Royal National Park Cabins*<sup>15</sup>)

The hut precinct of the mouth of the Donnelly River demonstrates rare, uncommon and endangered aspects of the cultural heritage of the southern coastal parts of Western Australia. It is also significant in demonstrating the characteristics of a class of cultural places or environments in the State.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The hut precinct at the mouth of the Donnelly River is absolutely unique. It represents a place of continuous coastal camping by up to four generations of local people over a period of almost 100 years. It is one of a few remaining holiday “camps” of early and mid twentieth century in Western Australia, and probably Australia, that still exhibit innovative and relatively undeveloped settlement.

The precinct has a close link to nineteenth century pastoral leases and provides one of the last remaining opportunities to reserve heritage values in-situ that are typical of an earlier, simpler and unhurried era.

Listing of the Donnelly River Mouth Hut Precinct on the State Heritage Register is proposed to protect its heritage values.

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<sup>13</sup> Pers comm Dr John Watson, *Regional Manager*, South Coast Region, CALM.

<sup>14</sup> Pers comm Dr John Watson, and Barbara Green, Shire of Albany, formerly *Regional Coastal Coordinator*.

<sup>15</sup> Hon. Jon Jenkins, MLC, Parliament of New South Wales – Speech 16 November 2004