Gascoyne Geographic Perspective

Setting

The Gascoyne region, extending over 137,938 square kilometres, has a varied and interesting landscape. The Zuytdorp cliffs south of Steep Point give way to an irregular coastline of islands, inlets and narrow tidal mudflats, extending from Shark Bay to Lake Macleod. Tidal advances and retreats create a unique environment which is sometimes flooded by the torrential rain of tropical cyclones. North of Lake Macleod, the coastline is once again characterised by limestone platforms and in places, high cliffs. Cape Range rises 300 metres above sea-level and occupies most of the Exmouth Peninsula.

Numerous rivers drain the region, their beds are mostly dry on the surface, except for a few permanent water holes. They flow intermittently, often with great force. The largest of these, the Gascoyne River and its tributary the Lyons, has a catchment area of 6.7 million hectares which extends 500 kilometres inland. The Gascoyne River flows occasionally between February and August. The river flows re-charge aquifers (water storage areas) in the river bed and are essential for the continuity of water supplies to Carnarvon.

Soils

The soils in the Gascoyne region have many features that are common to semi-arid soils elsewhere in Australia. Most obvious is the predominantly red colouration of the soil which is due to soil particles covered by oxides of iron. Towards the coast, sandy calcareous soils are often lighter in colour due to littoral shell fragments and oxide leaching, while the browner calcareous earths tend to differ in colour due to the high concentrations of carbonates and lower concentrations of iron oxides. Organic matter is low and generally concentrated within the top few millimetres. The alluvial soils of the Carnarvon plantation area are loamy fine sands or silty loams. They are well drained and alkaline. Fertility is high and only small amounts of nitrogen fertiliser are required for high yields.

Geology

Much of the region is covered by a large sedimentary basin known as the Carnarvon Basin. The sedimentary Carnarvon Basin slopes gently towards the coast and is characterised by low relief, open drainage and large gently undulating sand plains. This contrasts strongly with the small area of Precambrian rocks in the north east of the Gascoyne, which has moderately high relief, a close dendritic drainage pattern and mature valley topography.

The eastern portion of the Carnarvon Basin is made up of a thick sequence of Palaeozoic sedimentary rocks all of which have a westerly regional dip. The sequence consists of limestone, sandstone and shale of varying age, almost entirely marine in origin.
To the west these rocks are overlain by cretaceous sandstone, shale, marle and limestone with a total thickness of six hundred metres. The western most belt of the basin is of Tertiary strata, mainly limestone.

East of the Carnarvon Basin are rocks of the Gascoyne Complex. These comprise granitic intrusions, and high-grade gneiss and metasediment of early Proterozoic Age, overlying Archaean gneissic basement rock.

The north eastern part of the Gascoyne region is covered by Middle Proterozoic sandstone, shale and dolomite of the Bangemall Basin. These sediments have been subjected to low-grade metamorphism, folding and intrusion by numerous dolerite sills.

Rocks in the region are highly weathered or overlain by soil or eolian sand. Extensive evaporite deposits of gypsum and salt occur in natural depressions near the coast.

**Climate**

The Gascoyne has a moderate arid tropical climate, the intense heat of the northern wet season or the cold winters of the south are not felt in coastal parts. Inland these extremes are felt. The region is promoted as ‘the suns winter home’ with around three hundred and twenty days of sunshine each year.

**Table 1. Monthly, annual & extreme temperature at representative stations (°C)**

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Rainfall in the Gascoyne is low, highly variable and averages about 200 millimetres per year. The majority of the rainfall occurs as a result of cyclonic activity and consequently, the amount varies widely.

Exmouth’s climate is characterised by hot summers and low rainfall. A significant feature of the area’s climate is the difference in temperature between the eastern and western sides of Cape Range during the summer months, as a result of the south west breeze.

The climate of the semi-arid Carnarvon area is suited to the growth of tropical and sub-tropical fruits under irrigation. Temperatures in autumn, winter and spring are ideal for vegetable crops. The area is influenced by the belt of South East Trade Winds which generate southerly winds for most of the year.


Coastal Geomorphology

The natural attractions of the region mainly relate to the coastal environment. In recent geological times, low areas of the Bullara Sunklands, a depression that runs parallel to the coast between
Shark Bay and Exmouth Gulf, were flooded by the sea to form Exmouth Gulf, Lake Macleod and Shark Bay.

Shark Bay, a vast shallow bay of about 13,000 square kilometres, is broken into a series of gulfs, inlets and basins by north-trending dune ridges and seagrass banks. Red wind blown sand dunes, soaring limestone cliffs, birridas and white beaches are features of Shark Bays ancient and varied landscape.

Seagrass covers over 4,000 square kilometres of the Bay, with the 1,030 square kilometre Wooramel Seagrass Bank being the largest structure of its type in the world.

Peron and Nanga Peninsulas and the prongs of Edel Land divide the waters of Shark Bay into a series of broad semi-enclosed gulfs and inlets: Freycinet Reach, Hopeless Reach, Lharidon Bight and Hamelin Pool. The most isolated basins are highly saline, and these areas support a restricted but unusual flora and fauna.

Some of the area’s outstanding features include the Zuytdorp Cliffs rising 170 metres from the water, and parts of the Tamala and Carrarang stations. Steep Point, the western most point on Australia’s mainland is included here.

There are many gypsum claypans (known as birridas) throughout the area. Most birridas were land locked saline lakes when sea levels were much higher than at present, and gypsum was deposited on the lake floors. In some places the sea has invaded the claypans, such as at Big and Little Lagoons, to form shallow inland bays.

Bernier and Dorre Islands which are located at the entrance to Shark Bay, fifty kilometres south west of Carnarvon, are important to the region’s natural and human history.

The Wooramel Seagrass Bank covers 103,000 hectares from the eastern shore of Shark Bay almost to Carnarvon. It contains one of the largest organically formed carbonate deposits in a modern environment. These limestone sands are known as ooid shoals and are formed by precipitation of calcium carbonate from hypersaline waters.

To the north is Lake Macleod, a large salt lake whose surface lies beneath sea level for most of the time. Lake Macleod, thirty kilometres north of Carnarvon, covers 300,000 hectares of mostly dry salt lake.

A limestone shelf extends from Point Quobba Reserve north, the remainder of the reserve is dominated by coastal dunes and beach ridges. North of the Point, low cliffs border a steep rocky intertidal zone which drops into deep water. To the south, sandy beaches abut a gradually sloping bottom of isolated coral patches amongst sand and macroalgae.

The rugged marine cliffs north of Carnarvon are unprotected by reefs or offshore islands and the deep blue ocean waters crash onto the dramatic coastline. Cape Cuvier has the most spectacular cliffs in this area of the coast, rising some 100m sheer above the ocean.
The coastline of Exmouth Gulf has many bays, the largest of which are the Bay of Rest, Giralia Bay and Gales Bay. Very extensive tidal flats, extending in places up to 15 kilometres landward of the shoreline, occur along the eastern shore of the Gulf.

An anticline called Cape Range is the major feature of the North West Cape peninsula. The range, part of which is a National Park has a maximum elevation of approximately 300 metres. Yardie Creek links the Cape Range to the marine environment of the Ningaloo Reef, its lower reaches are tidal and saline whilst its upper reaches contain fresh water.

The West Coast of North West Cape is part of the Ningaloo Reef Marine Park. This park contains Australia’s longest fringing coral reef and is home to a variety of sea life including impressive game fish. The reef is 260 kilometres long and only about two to three metres offshore. It fringes the Coast from south of Point Murat on North West Cape, around the Cape and south to Amherst Point in the Carnarvon Shire.

**Inland Geomorphology**

Inland, the Gascoyne region is dominated by wide alluvial valleys, the drainage basins of the Wooramel, Gascoyne, Lyons, Minilya, Lyndon and Ashburton Rivers. This area contains vast alluvial plains and red dune belts interspersed between low sedimentary ranges, such as Kennedy Range.

The landforms of the regions inland areas result from periods when the Carnarvon Basin was a shallow sea bordering a landmass with a wetter climate than at present. Subsequent actions by wind, water and geological forces have produced a unique landscape.

Mooka Springs west of Gascoyne Junction on Mooka Station, is a lush green oasis, with flowing springs in a red cliff gorge. The oasis is home to a variety of wildlife and also found within the area is an assortment of gemstones particularly ‘Mookerite’.

The scenically beautiful Kennedy Range National Park, extends for 195 kilometres. The Ranges, twenty kilometres north west of Gascoyne Junction, are a habitat for flora and fauna and contain fossiliferous rocks and gemstone deposits. This sandstone range covers an area of 172,000 hectares.

Fossil Hill thirty six kilometres east of Gascoyne Junction, on Bidgemia Station, contains numerous fossils from the Permian Age.

Mount Augustus National Park derives its name from Australia’s largest isolated rock, Mount Augustus which rises 858 metres above the surrounding landscape at the western edge of a long ridge. The area around Mount Augustus, which includes the Edney’s Spring Art Sites is also important to Aboriginal people and contains sites of artistic and archaeological significance.
The Cape Range National Park occupies a large portion of the Shire of Exmouth. It contains spectacular limestone canyons, rugged ranges and fresh water caves of paleontological significance. As well as the endangered brush tailed rock wallaby, there are diverse reptile and botanical species in the park and surrounding areas.

Vegetation

The land of the Gascoyne region is mostly low lying. It is almost entirely semi arid scrub with little or no tree cover. The natural vegetation has not been cleared over much of the area. However, extensive grazing by hard hooved sheep, cattle and goats has affected the soil and some plant species.

The natural vegetation consists of the Spinifex (*Triodia*), Wattle (*Acacia*) and Poverty Bush (*Eremophila*) shrub varieties. Along the rivers and adjacent flood plains, several varieties of eucalypt grow, together with Paperbarks (*Cadjeputs*). Sandalwood clumps were once common but are becoming a rarity.

On the alluvial flats, shrubs present are of the Bluebush (*Maireana*) and Saltbush (*Atriplex*) species, while on wetter sites, the shrub *Halosarcia* is present. Around coastal areas there is much growth of Mangrove varieties with the *Avicennia marina* species particularly prevalent around Shark Bay and Exmouth.

When winter rains fall, an almost unbelievable transformation of the countryside occurs. Many colourful wildflowers of the Everlasting, Swainsona and other varieties spring up around existing shrubs, creating a kaleidoscope of colour. Buffel, the most common grass in the region, is thought to have been introduced here shortly after World War II.

Terrestrial Fauna

Red Kangaroos and Euros are common in the region. Smaller marsupials and bats, including rare and endangered species, are found often in the less accessible parts of the mainland and on offshore islands.

A wide diversity of birds, both resident and migratory, inhabit the Gascoyne. Large flocks of corellas and galahs are the most easily visible (and audible). Emus, parrots and numerous smaller birds contribute a variety of colour and song throughout the region.

The Shark Bay region has a rich avifauna. Over 230 species or 35% of Australia’s bird species have been recorded in the region, with three of these being rare bird species.

Lake Macleod is home to diverse bird species and an important resting spot for transequatorial migratory waders.
There are many species of snakes and lizards including large and impressive goannas. Dingoes and feral animals such as goats, foxes, cats and rabbits have had a significant effect on the vegetation and fauna of the region.

The only natural wild populations of the Banded Hare Wallaby, Western Barred Bandicoot and Shark Bay Mouse are found on Bernier and Dorre Islands. Burrowing Bettongs have been released onto Heirisson Prong as an attempt to re-introduce the species onto the mainland.

Shark Bay is noted for its diversity of amphibians and reptiles and supports nearly 100 species, of which thirteen reptile species are threatened. Amphibians include the mudskipper in mangrove swamps and frogs which spend most of their life burrowed in the earth.

**Marine Fauna**

The marine fauna of the Gascoyne is diverse and plentiful. The single, most profound effect on this fauna is the Leeuwin Current. Usually, western shores have a cold, northward flowing current, yet along the Gascoyne coast there is a warm, southerly current which carries tropical seed for fish and coral from the Indian - Indonesian Archipelago.

The Gascoyne coast is renowned as having the best recreational fishing in the State. There are many beautiful fish species in the region including the Baldchin Groper and Coral Trout. In the Ningaloo Marine Park more than 200 species of coral fauna can be found.

Also occurring in the attractive park and of particular conservation interest, are the green and hawksbill turtles, dugong, humpback whale and the whale shark. The Gascoyne region is an important site for migratory species such as the Humpback whale.

The Whale Shark phenomenon occurs in Autumn and numbers are greatest particularly in April. Whale Sharks represent the largest living fish and the largest living cold blooded animal. They are gentle and inquisitive, feeding on plankton and small fish.

Coral spawning on the Ningaloo lasts for seven to nine nights after the March and April full moons. The coral spawning may explain the Whale Sharks’ presence. The sharks feed not on spawn but on the creatures associated with spawning corals. Plankton consisting mainly of the larvae of bottom-dwelling creatures such as crabs, tropical krill and mantis shrimps, form a large part of the Whale Sharks’ diet.

Monkey Mia is home to a large wild dolphin pod of about 300 animals. Several of these bottlenose dolphins are regular visitors to the beach.

Shark Bay has one tenth of the world’s dugong population (approximately 10,000 animals) and significant loggerhead turtle rookeries. The Bay contains breeding grounds for prawns, scallops and commercial finfish as well as habitats for endangered green turtles.
The 12 species of seagrass in Shark Bay make it one of the most diverse seagrass assemblages in the world. Seagrass support numerous marine animals including turtles and dugongs.

Stromatolites represent the oldest form of life on earth. Constructed by cyanobacteria, they are representative of life-forms some 3,500 million years ago. Hamelin Pool contains the most diverse and abundant examples of stromatolite forms in the world, comparable to fossils in ancient rocks.

Shell Beach, a stretch of coastline about 60 kilometres long, has been formed by the shells of the tiny coquina bivalve that are constantly deposited onto the shore.

The shores, reefs and islands of Exmouth Gulf are important breeding grounds for turtles and seabirds and the Gulf waters are a rich marine life habitat.

A unique subterranean fauna has been recently discovered in Cape Range and has created world wide scientific interest because it provides evidence of continental drift and the evolution of specific species. The fauna, known as troglobites are small, live in limestone rock caves and are blind due to adapting to a life in darkness.

Land Use

The predominant land use in the Gascoyne is pastoral. In 1994, there were seventy five leases covering 11,497,151 hectares, 84% of the Gascoyne region.

The horticulture industry utilises approximately 1,000 hectares. Mining lease boundaries change frequently throughout the Gascoyne and Ashburton mineral fields. In 1994, some 224 mining tenements were in force, covering 1,368,089 hectares.

Cape Range National Park covers 50,581 hectares and Ningaloo Marine Park 224,000 hectares, some of which overlaps Cape Range. The Marine Park includes all land adjacent to coastal waters where use and management may affect the stability of the coastline or the quality of the coastal waters.

The Kennedy Range National Park encompasses 141,660 hectares with the ranges extending 195 km long and up to 30 km wide.

The Mount Augustus National Park covers 9,168 hectares and includes the worlds largest monocline.

Shark Bay became a World Heritage listed area in 1991 and is one of only eleven places on the World Heritage List to satisfy all four natural criteria for listing. The Shark Bay World Heritage Area extends over 2,320,000 hectares and overlaps the Shark Bay Marine Park which encompasses 748,735 hectares. Within the Marine Park, the Hamelin Pool Nature Reserve covers 132,000 hectares.
Francois Peron National Park stretches over about 40,000 hectares of undulating sandy plains interspersed by gypsum claypans.

**Heritage**

The natural history of the Gascoyne region has produced a landscape and marine environment with many unique features. As well as being scenically attractive, these places are important for the flora and fauna and as records of Australia’s geological past. The landscape has also been marked by the regions Aboriginal occupants and the Europeans who arrived more recently. There are numerous sites of importance to the Gascoyne’s human history. The region received many visits from Dutch, French and English explorers who have given their name to land and sea features.

A Dutchman, Dirk Hartog, was the first known Westerner to land in the region when in October, 1616 en route to Java, he landed on the island that now bears his name. He was closely followed by William Jansz in the Mauritius, which made landfall in the vicinity of the North West Cape in 1618. William Dampier named Shark Bay during his visit in 1688 and a French Expedition, captained by Nicholas Baudin in 1801 was responsible for the many French place names in Shark Bay and around North West Cape.

Lieutenant Phillip Arthur King completed a survey of Exmouth Gulf in 1818 and Lieutenant George Grey named the Gascoyne River after a fellow officer in 1839, FT Gregory explored the region in 1858 and publicised its suitability for pastoralism.

European settlement began in the 1860’s following legislative Council inducements to pastoralists to take up leases for the grazing of sheep.

Settlement of the Gascoyne River delta began in the late 1870’s. The town of Carnarvon developed as a port for shipping livestock and wool and was gazetted in 1883. The town took its name from Lord Carnarvon, Secretary of State for the Colonies 1873 to 1977. Its streets were made wide enough for the Afghan camel teamsters to turn their teams of thirty camels and wool wagons.

Shark Bay was the site of Australia’s first pearling industry, established in the 1850’s. Denham was proposed as a town site in 1897, due to the availability of fresh water and settlement began there officially in 1898. The town took its name from Captain Denham RN, who surveyed the area in 1858.

In 1896, a jetty was built and a townsite gazetted at Mauds Landing to service the wool industry. Early activities in the area included wool production, shark fishing and the cutting of sandalwood, which was carted by bullock team and shipped on the Blue Funnel Line ships to Singapore.
The task of establishing a pastoral industry and townships in the Gascoyne required considerable sacrifices by the early settlers. The hostile environment, isolation and poor communications made for a brutal life even by the standards of the time.

Boom Boom Springs, 230 kilometres east north east of Gascoyne Junction contains numerous engravings, stone structures and artefacts suggesting it was a major Aboriginal camping ground in the past. The effect of settlement on the regions Aboriginal society was overwhelming, due to the effect of introduced disease on a people who had no resistance to even mild ailments.

Stock routes along which drovers took cattle from the Ashburton and Pilbara to railheads at Mullewa and Meekatharra pass through the region. The hand built Nundings Well and Stockyards on Landor Station, west of Gascoyne Junction, were an important stopping place for drovers in the early part of the century.

The Bangemall Wayside Hotel, now the Cobra homestead offered hospitality to drovers, camel teamsters, pastoralists and gold diggers from the Bangemall Goldfields. It is one of the few surviving examples of wayside hotels which were scattered throughout the North West. It was also an important social gathering place in the past and local horse races were held there.

In the early 1920’s plantations were established in Carnarvon on the banks of the Gascoyne River for the commercial production of bananas on what was already accepted as one of the most fertile areas of Australia. Southern European migrants who bought and operated plantations were largely responsible for establishing vegetable growing after the road to Perth was completed in 1955.

Whaling commenced at Point Cloates in 1912 and at Babbage Island in Carnarvon in 1949. By the 1960’s, processing ceased due to a decline in the number of suitably sized whales and was replaced by prawn trawling.

The Mile Long Jetty and Lighthouse Keepers Cottage on Babbage Island near Carnarvon were both built in the early 1900’s. The Vlaming Head lighthouse at Exmouth was built in 1912. They are all important reminders of the time when coastal shipping was the major transport for passengers, supplies and exports.

The seventeenth century Zuytdorp Shipwreck at the base of the cliffs which bear its name is protected by a national park seventy five kilometres north of Kalbarri. Another shipwreck, off Exmouth, was the Fairy Queen shipwreck, which sank on a pearling expedition from Singapore in 1875.

Jubilee Hall in Carnarvon was built in 1917, on a site which had been a public gathering place since the town was founded in 1887. It has served for meetings, entertainment, a public library and is currently an art and craft centre.

The OTC station at Carnarvon was Australia’s first earth station for satellite communication. It began operating in October 1966 and was originally a support function to the NASA space flight tracking station which was situated nearby and operated until 1975.
The town of Exmouth was opened to service the Naval Communication Station and was gazetted in 1963. The Shire of Exmouth was controlled by a Civil Commissioner until 1979 when a Council was elected.

The North West Cape was an airbase and naval refuelling point for allied forces in World War II and traces of this past remain in what is known as Potshot.

For further Assistance

Further information can be obtained from the Director, Gascoyne Development Commission at:

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