

Caring for the Track

Care of the Bibbulmun Track depends on its volunteers

The returns are enormous for those volunteering along the Bibbulmun Track.

Words & images: Jill Harrison

The 2015 summer bushfires in Western Australia's south-west that destroyed thousands of hectares of bushland, national parks and private property, also had a devastating effect on parts of the 1000-kilometre Bibbulmun Track.

Listed by *National Geographic* in 2014 as one of the world's top twenty walk trails, the loss of four campsites and several bridges, including the historic Long Gully Bridge over the Murray River and the closure of large sections of the track in the Helena, Lower Hotham and Northcliffe areas shattered the Bibbulmun Track Foundation, its members, volunteers and those who have walked the track and feel a connection to it.

After seeing first-hand the tragic obliteration of the Long Gully Bridge I was interested to hear how the losses had affected those involved with the track and to learn about the maintenance work carried out by its 300 volunteers. So, I accompanied two volunteers, Wendy Pittick and Pat O'Leary, along 'their' section

either side of the Grimwade campsite north of Balingup.

It was the first time they had been there since the bushfires and as we approached the campsite they were brought to a standstill by a large section of bush that had been destroyed by bushfire only a few hundred metres from the campsite.

Their reactions were a mixture of sorrow at the destruction and relief that the hut had been saved. We could see where bulldozers had cleared a rough firebreak around the campsite to protect it.

'When we first heard about the bushfires south of Northcliffe and north of Collie everybody who has ever walked or volunteered knew that our track was at risk, and I did feel very sad, sick, sorry,' Wendy explained.

'I have always had a fear and respect for fire – the ferocity of it. When I went out to the Long Gully Bridge I was speechless. However, we live in Australia and we are never going to be totally fire proof. But I believe the Bibbulmun Track will always be here; it will be resilient. It might have to

be rerouted, but it will prevail.'

Wendy Pittick became involved with the Bibbulmun Track after moving to the south-west of the state in 1999 when she joined the Bunbury Bushwalking Club and then the Bunbury Adventure Pursuits Club.

'Both groups are passionate supporters of the Bibbulmun Track, did a lot of bushwalking and were very experienced and supportive. The Pursuits Club were the volunteers for this section of the track, so I started coming out with them,' she recalled. 'It was a great way to learn from experienced walkers about equipment and food, and to become more skilled in expertise and knowledge.'

'In 2004, I became a registered volunteer and later invited Pat O'Leary to join me. Since then we've brought many friends out here and promoted the track. I enjoy bringing people here who perhaps have never had the opportunity.'

She also explained how the Foundation gives comprehensive training to volunteers.

'They hold annual field days for each region, which is an opportunity for all the



Clockwise from left:

The forest towers over the walkers on the Bibbulmun Track near Grimwade. ♡ Track volunteers (L to R): Rick Turner, Wendy Pittick, Alison O'Sullivan, Pat O'Leary and Rod Harrison. ♡ Bushfire damage from the summer 2015 bushfires came within a few hundred metres of the Grimwade campsite.

FACT FILE



Getting there

The Bibbulmun Track runs 1000 km from Kalamunda near Perth to Albany in Western Australia.

Where to camp

There are 49 campsites along the Track, which are spaced a day's walk apart. Refer to www.bibbulmuntrack.org.au for locations.

When to go

The best times to walk the Track are in autumn (April to May), winter (June to August) and spring (September to mid-November).

Further information

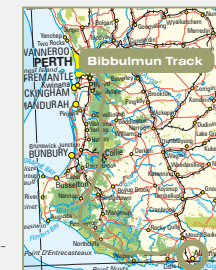
For more information: www.bibbulmuntrack.org.au
Phone: (08) 9481 0551.

Please refer to the website for up-to-date information if you are planning a walk or if you are interested in volunteering.

Important Bushfire update information

The Bibbulmun Track Foundation recently advised that, for the first time since the summer 2015 bushfires, an End-to-End journey is now possible.

Sections of the track have either been re-opened or diversions have been put in place. Please refer to the website for information on diversions. Do not rely on previous maps or books. Please note that some huts have not been rebuilt as yet so you might need to carry a tent or shelter.



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