

# WA IFA "North-of-Perth" Field Tour

By Luisa Liddicoat

On Saturday 6 October a group of 22 enthusiastic members and partners, led by Owen Donovan, congregated early in the morning at the Forests Products Commission's Office at Gnangara, at the start of a tour to check the status of the State's *Pinus pinaster* (Maritime pine) plantations on sand country north of Perth and to inspect more recently planted pines, eucalypts and sandalwood on private farmland further afield. With the south-west of WA undergoing a long period of reducing rainfall, culminating in a record drought year in 2010, the group braced itself for some confronting scenes.

The convoy of vehicles first stopped at Pessoa Road in Gnangara, where the oldest pine plantations are located, at the south end of the Government owned pine estate. This is a popular recreation area, planted from 1939 to 1942, with perhaps the largest *pinaster* trees in WA. Owen provided the group with an insight into the complex issues of silviculture, stocking, replenishing the underground water aquifer as well as recreation pressures from expanding suburbia. Most significantly, there has been a Government directive to steadily liquidate the Gnangara plantation on the assumption that the pines use up too much of the underground water, and for trees on Pinjar and Yanchep plantations to be thinned to wide spacing, again to conserve water. The surrounding "moonscape" of clearfelled plantation at Gnangara, littered with household rubbish and burnt out cars, surrounded by water guzzling market gardens and looming brick and tile project homes, was a less than pleasing scenario.

Next on the itinerary was to travel through the remains of Gnangara plantation, past Pinjar and Yanchep plantations and hundreds of hectares of drought and wildfire killed pines, to the northern end of the pine estate at Wabbling Tower. The vista from that point showed some compartments almost completely drought killed and some that had been thinned to wide spacing and surviving. Amazingly, *pinaster* trees killed by drought nearly two years ago are still being salvage harvested and exported in containers to China for sawmilling. The sole local market for the Forest Products Commission-managed pines is the local Wesbeam LVL factory which can utilize freshly felled timber only.

Further north we passed an eight year old *pinaster* sharefarm plantation which had been non-commercially thinned in a desperate attempt to mitigate drought, a key activity since 2010.

Members enjoyed a picnic lunch at the scenic Moore River picnic area, near Regan's Ford roadhouse. Lunch time discussion included the IFA's submission to the draft Forest Management Plan (FMP).

After lunch we met farmer John Glasfurd and inspected sharefarm plantings of *Pinus pinaster*, *P. brutia*, various eucalypts and sandalwood, growing on basically "hungry sand". After witnessing the liquidation of a whole plantation further south to save water, it was paradoxical to see some



A harsh environment.

of these trees, and others surrounding nearby Isbisters Lake, being grown to reduce water tables. Oh, the complexity of hydrology!

Lastly, McGilvray Arboretum near New Norcia was the perfect place to end the tour, as some headed back to the city whilst most pulled into the New Norcia hotel for a welcome drink. The Arboretum was established relatively recently, with the range of eucalypt species challenging members' tree identification skills.

After a refreshing Abbey Ale, most of the group took advantage of the remaining daylight to squeeze in a quick look at a cork oak trial, a short drive from this mainly wheat and sheep growing town about 100 km north east of Perth

During a sumptuous dinner at the historic New Norcia hotel at the end of this very interesting and informative day, we listened to Gavin Butcher talk about key aspects of the draft new Forest Management Plan. Finally, we enjoyed an entertaining outline of life in the monastery delivered by one of the monks, leaving some members pondering on which life was more fulfilling, forestry or the monastery!

Those who stayed overnight at the hotel or at the Old Convent had the opportunity to explore the town's attractions the next day, departing at their own leisure. New Norcia is Australia's only monastic town, home to a community of Benedictine Monks, founded in 1847 by a group of missionaries from Europe. The Monastery, the Museum, the Art Gallery, the Hotel and the old residential colleges, with their Gothic and Byzantine architecture, are a curiosity in an open Australian landscape, and very much worth the visit.

This was a very insightful tour with a wonderful opportunity to network with colleagues and friends. A heartfelt thank you to all involved in organising this tour.



Hotel built by Benedictine monks.



Hotel built by Benedictine monks - at night.



Isbisters Lake.



Paul Smale and Luisa Liddicoat.



Owen Donovan and John Clarke and *Pinus Pinaster*.



Salmon Gum.