

HAMELIN POOL STROMATOLITES

Grievance

MS M. BEARD (North West Central) [9.28 am]: Today my grievance is to the Minister for Environment. I thank the minister for taking my grievance. I grieve about a vital environmental and tourism asset in my electorate, the Hamelin Pool stromatolites. Hamelin Pool Marine Nature Reserve is home to the most diverse and abundant examples of stromatolites in the world. Also referred to as “living fossils”, stromatolites are living representatives of life over 3 500 million years ago when there was no other complex life on earth.

A 200-metre boardwalk at Hamelin Pool provides excellent views for these stromatolites. Nearby is the old Hamelin Pool Telegraph Station, which was built in 1884 as part of the communication line between Perth and Roebourne. Hamelin Pool is considered the best place in the world to access and view stromatolites. Hamelin Pool is a world-class tourism asset but currently the site is in a state of stagnation and disrepair. Since cyclone Seroja in April 2021, the community has been waiting for this asset to be built back better, as was the promise and mantra. It is absolutely vital that this world-class tourist asset and ecological wonder is protected but can be shown to visitors who come from far and wide to see these magnificent and ancient forms of life.

I drove to Hamelin Pool over the recess and was shocked to see that the site was a mirror of the site I saw over 18 months ago. How is this possible 28 months after the Seroja weather event? I am hearing of instances of people climbing over the barriers to see the stromatolites and even onto the stromatolites themselves due to the fact that the boardwalk is closed and not accessible. The stromatolites are extremely sensitive, and with access to them being cut off, it could be argued that the requirements for their presentation and protection under the World Heritage Convention are not being met and therefore not complying with obligations under the convention. They offer two of the four natural criteria required for World Heritage status. It concerns me that with such a long period of inaction the stromatolites are at risk.

Can the minister outline the elements that the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions needs to manage to maintain the World Heritage status? Has the department sought or had advice from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization about the impact of the damage and the closure on the site’s World Heritage status? As site manager, what has DBCA been doing since April 2021 to get this site open and make it an even better place to visit and stay? I recognise that there have been discussions about repairing what was damaged by the storms. I would also like to know whether DBCA had insurance to cover this damage. If so, was it sufficient to cover the full replacement costs? Has the minister spoken to the Treasurer and Premier to seek additional funding to cover any shortfall or deliver a broader site upgrade than just the jetty? Is DBCA developing a submission for consideration on this project as part of the *Government mid-year financial projections statement* process? The site would benefit from new signage and toilets to ensure the infrastructure amenities meet the quality of the tourism offering that exists.

This protracted period of inaction and closure is impacting negatively on the local caravan park, which has seen tourist numbers drop as the stromatolites cannot be accessed, with visitors either staying for less time or bypassing Hamelin Pool all together. The stromatolites are vitally important as a tourism link to the area and other attractions; they are the gateway to the World Heritage area. They are the first attraction along the site-to-site experience that is the World Heritage drive, a continuous journey that the World Heritage values—a continuous journey that is missing a foundation pillar, with visitors voicing their displeasure at travelling for hours only to find the Hamlin Pool stromatolites boardwalk, which is advertised widely, closed and not accessible. It is estimated that prior to tropical cyclone Seroja, annually 130 000 people visited the stromatolites. This year around 40 000 visitors have been to the Shark Bay World Heritage Discovery and Visitor Centre. The drop in numbers in the raw data, and anecdotal information, is interesting. The impact of this closure on the other tourism icons like Shark Bay and Monkey Mia has been and continues to be immense.

This continued inaction by the government has also put pressure on the local shire and visitor centres, as visitors and the public are rightly asking questions and seeking answers about where things are up to and what is going on. Anecdotal feedback is that one in two visitors to the local visitor centre are raising concerns about the condition of Hamelin Pool. The feedback ranges from reports of being mildly inconvenienced to making a complaint to even scathing disappointment. They are big numbers and show the interest in this world-class asset and the urgent need for action by this minister to get this project moving and delivered in a way that leverages this remarkable asset for decades to come. Given that the responsibility for action sits with the minister and that the need for action is now, the ball is sitting wholly in the court of the minister and DBCA. To date, the community seems to have been served double faults, and the project urgently needs to be served up with an ace!

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldivis — Minister for Environment) [9.34 am]: The tennis references came out of the blue! I thank the member for North West Central, and I really appreciate her raising this issue. She raised a number of matters and I will address those issues in my response. I do not think it is correct to say that there has been

no action. There has been a lot of action, and I will explain what has happened to date. The member is right that Shark Bay was WA's first listed World Heritage area due to its natural beauty, unique stromatolite communities, cultural significance and outstanding marine biodiversity, which we are both aware of. No-one understands the importance of protecting and celebrating this region more than the Labor Party because it was the Hawke Labor government in partnership with the Lawrence Labor government that successfully inscribed Shark Bay on to the World Heritage List in 1991.

There is no doubt that Hamelin Pool was a key part of Shark Bay's listing as a World Heritage area. The pool is home to the most diverse and abundant examples of stromatolites in the world, as the member pointed out. They are commonly referred to as living fossils—so it is not fair to say that living fossils exist only in the National Party; they exist in the natural environment as well! As the member said, they are 3.5 billion years old. The microbial mats and stromatolites at Hamelin Pool are among the most diverse in the world and show what marine ecosystems would previously have looked like. As the member rightly said, the pool is a major tourism drawcard, with more than 132 000 visits recorded there in 2021. This represented the second-most visited tourist site in the Shark Bay World Heritage area.

Getting to the boardwalk at Hamelin Pool, it had previously acted to protect fragile stromatolites from pedestrian damage. The timber boardwalk was built in 1996 to allow visitors to experience the stromatolites while having minimal impact on the fragile surrounding environment. Unfortunately, as we both know, in April 2021 cyclone Seroja severely damaged the boardwalk. The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions had no choice but to close the boardwalk due to the risk to visitor safety. Since that time, the department has engaged a marine engineering firm to undertake a structural assessment of the damaged boardwalk and to evaluate options to repair the existing structure or replace it using alternative materials and design to mitigate the risk of future damage from storm events. This work found that the boardwalk is already reaching the end of its life and will need to be fully replaced. The government is now considering the most appropriate options to address this matter. It is an important issue and we will not rush it.

The member mentioned insurance. Insurance would have covered the repair but not the full replacement value. That is also a matter we are looking at.

It is also important to be mindful that the department is responsible for managing 31 million hectares of national parks and conservation reserves that receive an average of 22 million visits a year. Although that is a testament to the quality of our parks, it places a significant cost on the state to ensure that these sites, many of which are in very remote parts of Western Australia, are adequately maintained. Striking the right balance in how we best prioritise our investments in our natural assets is a very challenging task.

I assure the member that the government remains committed to the future of Shark Bay, its environment and the tourism it attracts. Despite the boardwalk closure, Hamelin Pool remains a fascinating destination for visitors. Visitor interpretation is provided about the stromatolites and the World Heritage significance of Shark Bay. There is a 1.4-kilometre walking trail that includes historic features such as grave sites, a shell block quarry and the old telegraph station that the member referred to.

This government is very proud of our investments in our environment, including in the member for North West Central's seat. In this term of government, we are investing \$12.1 million into the region as part of the WA Recovery Plan, Plan for Our Parks and World Heritage and national heritage grant initiatives. Projects include Monkey Mia walk trails, interpretation and landscaping. There are park infrastructure upgrades at Kennedy Range National Park and Pimbee National Park, along with upgrades to the Milyering Discovery Centre at Cape Range National Park. Who could forget that the McGowan government delivered the Kalbarri Skywalk in 2020, the \$24 million project that saw the installation of two giant cantilevered platforms overlooking the Murchison Gorge, with a kiosk, shade shelters, toilets, parking and 22 kilometres of road upgrades. It was a very impressive and significant investment in tourism in the member for North West Central's seat.

We are not running away from this issue. We are seriously looking at the options for the boardwalk, and, in the meantime, we are committed to making sure that the damage is monitored by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and stopped as much as possible. I will be making sure that those efforts are increased, but, in the meantime, we continue on course with the replacement program.