

HAMELIN POOL STROMATOLITES

Grievance

MS L. DALTON (Geraldton) [9.32 am]: Today my grievance is to the Minister for Environment, and I thank the minister for taking my grievance. I am presenting it to the Minister for Environment, not the Minister for Tourism, because although my region, Australia's coral coast, is filled with attractions for the curious and adventurous traveller, today's grievance, although still related to tourism, is in support of ecological conservation and the protection of Western Australia's longest-living creatures, the Hamelin Pool stromatolites. Located at the gateway of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Shark Bay World Heritage area, the stromatolites at Hamelin Pool are a diverse and abundant display of ancient life forms. They have survived for over three billion years in their habitat, so I ask on behalf of my constituents in Geraldton and the midwest, and for the tens of thousands of travellers to this ecologically significant region: what can we expect going forward for Hamelin Pool?

Being from the midwest, I know firsthand the impacts of cyclone Seroja and the destruction caused when it hit our coast on 11 April 2021. Seroja was the first cyclone to hit as far south as the midwest since cyclone Elaine in 1999. Winds of over 100 kilometres an hour breezed past the Shark Bay area, causing storm surges and damage. The cyclone strengthened before making landfall in the midwest, causing destruction in Kalbarri, Northampton, Geraldton and further inland, before weakening near Dalwallinu but maintaining momentum as it tracked south and emerged off our southern coast. The repair and recovery bill has been estimated at over \$400 million. The efforts to rebuild and recover from cyclone Seroja have caused immense pressure on our construction industry, and we were very fortunate that the event did not cause too much damage in our midwest and Gascoyne National Parks or to the stromatolites themselves.

Alas, the 200-metre boardwalk, which was installed in 1996, did not fare well at all. For public safety and to reduce the risk of damage to the critical environmental reserve, the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions had to make the difficult decision to close the boardwalk and limit shore access while assessments were made and a plan to rebuild was put in place. Those assessments deemed the boardwalk to be unsuitable for repair, and the advice was that the boardwalk had to be replaced in its entirety.

Many travellers to the Shark Bay World Heritage area are self-drive visitors, meaning many people come through Geraldton for supplies and stay for a while. Travellers have shared their experiences, and a few have brought to my attention that they were disappointed that they could not access the boardwalk. They also gave feedback that the stromatolites are still visible from the quarry vantage point, and one requires only a pair of binoculars when looking for whales off the Kalbarri cliffs.

I am pleased that our government is taking a considered approach to reopening this attraction, for there must be a balance between what visitors feel entitled to and the protection of our environment. I do not think that there is a need to apologise for this caution, because we cannot barrel back in and cause damage to this unique environment and area of scientific study.

The balance I saw demonstrated in the Kalbarri National Park is a good example of our government's commitment to increasing the value of our national parks and attractions by installing visitor infrastructure that is complementary to and mindful of the precious environment it sits in. Kaju Yatka, or Kalbarri Skywalk, opened in June 2020 and fast became one of Western Australia's most awarded attractions. The design and construction created over 150 jobs. The attraction went on to win accolades for engineering, landscape design and tourism. It was created in collaboration with the Nanda people of the Murchison region, recognising their strong connection to the land and developing cultural tourism.

I ask the minister: what plans does the WA government have to work with the Malgana people to restore the Hamelin Pool attractions and protect our flora and fauna?

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldvis — Minister for Environment) [9.36 am]: I thank the member for Geraldton for the grievance, and I appreciate her giving me some notice. I also acknowledge that the member for North West Central previously asked me about this issue. It is an issue of interest around the chamber.

Today, I would like to inform the house of the Cook government's commitment to fully restore access to this world-class tourism attraction, the locally iconic boardwalk, at Hamelin Pool in Shark Bay. That is a commitment we are going ahead with. In 2021, the boardwalk was severely damaged by cyclone Seroja. Consultant engineers found that the boardwalk was reaching the end of its life and would need to be fully replaced. After consideration, the view was that the whole structure needed replacing rather than being patched up or having sections repaired; that was the best investment and course forward. The advice provided considered minimising any long-term environmental impacts from construction activity on the surrounding stromatolites' environment. It is a sensitive area, and we need to be careful of the way we do this. Following a careful assessment of all options, the government

committed \$4.6 million, through the midyear review process, to build a new 230-metre-long boardwalk over the World Heritage area to restore the stromatolite viewing experience. Constructing the new boardwalk will be complex, given the area's environmental sensitivity and its cultural significance to the Malgana people. The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions is coordinating the project, and engineers are currently developing the boardwalk's construction method and concept design. The new boardwalk is expected to be in place in 2025.

This is fantastic news for those who know of or have visited Hamelin Pool because it really is unlike anywhere else on the planet. Specifically, the stromatolites at the location represent the oldest forms of life on earth. At Hamelin Pool, visitors witness rare living examples of this evolutionary and scientific phenomenon. Also referred to as living fossils, stromatolites are living representatives of life over 3.5 billion years ago, when there was no other complex life on earth. As I mentioned before, Hamelin Pool is also situated in a World Heritage area, Shark Bay, and this will be an incredible piece of infrastructure for the area. Shark Bay was WA's first World Heritage listed area due to its natural beauty, stromatolite communities and cultural significance. It was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1991. No-one understands the importance of protecting and celebrating this region more than the Labor Party. In 1991, the Hawke Labor government, in partnership with the Lawrence Labor government, successfully inscribed Shark Bay on the World Heritage List. When addressing the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources a year prior, Bob Hawke spoke about the importance of sites such as Shark Bay. He said —

It is a laboratory for scientists, a magnet for tourists and above all a priceless part of the heritage of the world.

The Shark Bay World Heritage area encompasses 2.2 million hectares on the coast of Western Australia. It is a colourful and diverse landscape, and home to many unique native animals and plants, including some found nowhere else on the planet. This area is home to the world's most diverse and extensive seagrass meadows, which support globally significant populations of dugongs and sea turtles. As a foundation marine habitat in Shark Bay, seagrass meadows provide many ecosystem services, including nursery habitat for important commercial and recreational fisheries. I again note that national and marine parks play a vital role in supporting commercial and recreational fishing. This area is essentially spectacular, and with the new boardwalk, people will come from around Western Australia, Australia and the world to see such a rich and diverse natural environment. The boardwalk will complement the recent investment of \$2.6 million through the government's WA recovery plan to upgrade other tourist destinations in Shark Bay. Recent upgrades include new shade shelters and toilets at Shell Beach Conservation Park, new toilets in the campgrounds at Steep Point, and power and water upgrades at the Steep Point ranger station.

With regards to the area more broadly, the Cook government is committed to supporting conservation and tourism. It is a big theme of ours—conservation and tourism. This government is investing \$12.1 million into the region as part of the WA recovery plan, Plan for our Parks and World and National Heritage grant initiatives. At Monkey Mia Conservation Park, WA recovery plan funding has enabled completion of the new ranger station, a new walk trail with boardwalk access to the elevated lookout, creation of the World Heritage interpretive garden, a shade shelter adjacent to the dolphin experience area, and refurbishment of the visitor centre. At Francois Peron National Park, the WA recovery plan funded construction of a boardwalk and lookout at Big Lagoon, and new ablutions at Peron homestead to accommodate volunteer groups, homestead hosts, school excursions, community groups, researchers and visiting staff. East of Shark Bay, at Mount Augustus National Park, known as Burringurrah, \$10 million is being invested as part of WA Labor's 2021 election commitment to improve tourism access, visitor facilities and safety.

A priority is to establish small cell mobile phone towers to provide mobile phone coverage along the park's main walk trails, which will enhance emergency response efforts when hikers become injured or fatigued. Office and workshop facilities have been established for national park rangers working in the Mt Augustus area, and the funding will also see the upgrading of visitor sites and facilities including walk trails. These projects complement the state's Plan for Our Parks initiative. In the midwest, 2.1 million hectares of new conservation estate is being established, and jointly vested and managed with traditional owners. These projects demonstrate this government's commitment to developing sustainable tourism, resulting in stronger communities and stronger economies in Western Australia's midwest.