Capturing the Cape: a photographic case study of the Cape Range bioregion of northwest Australia; Straight lines: a photographic case study of the Cape Range bioregion of northwest Australia

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Capturing the Cape

A Photographic Case Study of the Cape Range Bioregion of Northwest Australia

Research Exegesis

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Date
5th November, 2012
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**Research Exegesis**  
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Title

Capturing the Cape: A Photographic Case Study of the Cape Range Bioregion of Northwest Australia.

Abstract

In Australia, as with much of the world, landscape photography has played a significant role in raising awareness of human impact on the environment. For the most part, this awareness raises questions of conservation and preserving the natural world. Landscape photography commonly depicts environmental issues in one of two ways: the damaging effects of humanity’s mastery over the environment; or the sublime wonder of nature. In effect, the messages sent by landscape photography are singular, describing either nature, or culture. However, with an intention to develop a more sustainable viewpoint concerning humanity’s relationships with the environment, landscape photography could be used to provide a more complete depiction of bioregions, focussing on all the major landscapes of a particular region. Essentially this position is a call for focus on the nature and the culture within bioregions, the developed and undeveloped, the pristine and the ruined.

This project conducts a photographic case study of the bioregion of the Northwest Cape of Western Australia, specifically the Cape Range sub-bioregion. The results portray comprehensive photographic exploration of the major landscapes of Cape Range subregion: from the national park and marine park tourist destinations; through the built landscapes of the town of Exmouth; to the military industrial wasteland of the Harold E. Holt communications base. It is the aim of this study to provide a more complete photographic picture of how local inhabitants interact with their bioregion. Simply, this
project captures the influence people have on the Cape, and the influence landscape has on the local contemporary culture.

**Introduction**

Travelling as a documentary photographer throughout every inhabited continent of the world has not only given me a tangible understanding of the extent of humanity’s environmental impact on the globe, but also the part photography plays in shaping the relationship between people and the land. Landscape photography has, for some time, been used to promote environmental conservation and issue warnings about the pressure human activity places on the earth, but Rod Giblett’s concept of “photography for environmental sustainability” (2012, p. 228) suggests a new direction for landscape photography, one that focuses more on promoting a symbiotic relationship.

Through the depiction of awe-inspiring natural splendor, environmental movements already utilise landscape photography in the push against industrial expansion (Tolonen, 2012, p. 21). Yet landscape photography has always played a key role in influencing the interactions between people and the world, as Steven Hoelscher, in discussing early North American expansionism, highlights:

> More than merely a pretty picture, the photographic view was... tightly bound to larger forces of American capitalism and imperialism as the country stretched into new territories, organized and measured the land, colonized space, and transformed the landscape. (1998, p. 551)

The capacity of photography to influence culture and perception is of considerable importance now that humanity faces the challenge of climate change and how to minimise it. The growing need for change toward more sustainable relationships between people and the environments they live in, and the idea that photography can be
instrumental in bringing about these changes is what I find interesting, hence my decision to explore it further.

Traditionally, Australian landscape photography has been used to depict mastery and ownership, a key contributor to the current issues of unsustainable practices with the land, as Giblett discusses:

The European landscape aesthetic produced the ways in which Europeans and their diaspora have seen and shaped the land through the percepts and practices of the gentleman’s park estate and the tourist’s package, national parks and wilderness, mining and pastoralism, and the ‘Bush’ of Australian mateship. (2004, p. 44)

These stereotypical images of a pastoral, and pastoralist, country helped to create a theory and practice of land use, a way of seeing and doing, which is increasingly being seen as unsustainable. (2012, p. 227)

These unsustainable relationships with the environment established through landscape photography, together with the environmental concerns arising out of climate change, highlight a need for landscape photography in Australia to not simply focus on emphasising unsustainable relationships with the environment, but to also depict the regions Australians inhabit with a greater focus on sustainability. This shift in the environmental message is key.

Historically, landscape photographs of Australia containing environmental messages have largely centred around two core modes of depiction: depicting the physical results of unsustainable practices in landscape – the damaged and ruined earth – as illustrated by landscape photographers such as Richard Woldendorp (figure 5) and Edward Burtynsky (figure 6); and photographs attesting to Australia’s sublime, picturesque and beautiful pristine landscapes, the most famous exemplar being the wilderness photography of Peter Dombrovskis (figure 4). While both of these very different aesthetic approaches are effective in drawing attention to the same environmental
it is my position that landscape photography depicting a more complete view of the various bioregions of the environment people inhabit will provide both a clearer picture and a better understanding of the relationships between inhabitants and their environment.

Essentially my project is in alignment with calls for more sustainable relationships between humans and the environment. I have chosen to document photographically the various landscapes of the bioregion of the Northwest Cape of Western Australia, specifically the Cape Range sub-bioregion, chiefly because photography has not yet been employed to depict this particular bioregion in the way I have proposed. Giblett defines a bioregion as “a geomorphological and biological region… where or on which one lives and works, and which sustains one’s life” (2004, p. 221). Based on this definition, I photographed the four core environments of the Cape Range subregion: the gateway tourism town of Exmouth; the tourism destinations of Cape Range National Park and Ningaloo Reef Marine Park; and the Harold E. Holt communications station. By concentrating on the Cape Range subregion, it was possible to investigate a bioregion with both clearly defined and varied landscapes, and a variety of human interactions within each landscape. Ultimately I have drawn a picture of how contemporary local inhabitants interact with their environment in the Cape Range subregion, and the resulting impact.

Landscape photography of the contemporary Western Australian environment has been largely categorised by a focus on human impacts, as present in the work of landscape. As Helen Ennis states in commenting on the work of Richard Woldendorp, “breathtakingly vast, they [the photographs] emphasize the recurring patterns and
abstract shapes created by the combined effects of nature and human activity (2007, p. 68), while Tolonen draws attention to Woldendorp’s focus on Australia’s harsh, unforgiving interior, that he terms “Badlands” (2012, p. 172). Arguably Woldendorp’s aesthetic approach passes a somewhat subtle comment on human influence over landscape, while Edward Burtynsky’s photography in the exhibition and book *Australian Minescapes* is a stark perspective on the human-ruined wastelands of the Western Australian mining industry. Despite the overt focus on ruin, Burtynsky portrays these industrial wastelands with an almost sublime wonder, akin to that of the sublimated natural landscape of wilderness photography (Tolonen, 2012, p. 193). Bordo suggests this aesthetic focus detracts from the environmental comment when he asks, “is the weakening of the referent’s hold on the photograph the price to be paid for aesthetics?” (2006, p. 90). However, one could equally argue that Burtynsky’s aestheticised landscapes even the odds between wilderness sublimated, and wasteland sublimated.

Irrespective of the approach taken to shed light on the mounting tension between people and the earth, as the urgency for more sustainable relationships and practices with the land grows, and the causes of climate change are clarified, it becomes apparent that the requirements for change come down to fostering a different understanding of humanity’s function in the world. By exploring the various landscapes of a single bioregion of North Western Australia, I have endeavoured to provide a new perspective on the physical relationships between locals and their environment, one that may lead to a new understanding of how these relationships could work in the future.
Figure 1. Biogeographic Regionalisation for Western Australia
Figure 2. Satellite view, Cape Range Sub-bioregion.
Significance

As discussed in the previous paragraph, the need for a change in the way humans view the bioregions they live in finds its relevance primarily in the issue of climate change. Skeptics continue to argue the direct causes of climate change, yet evidence suggesting human activity is the single most influential factor is mounting. John Houghton, in discussing the first report on climate change released in 1990 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Scientific Assessment (IPCC), states that “continued accumulation of anthropogenic greenhouse gases in the atmosphere would lead to climate change whose rate and magnitude [is] likely to have important impacts on natural and human systems” (1996, 11). Houghton’s point is further, and more succinctly, summarised by James Wang and Bill Chameides who state that “all known natural explanations for the current global warming trend have been eliminated by direct observations. The human-intensified greenhouse effect provides the only quantitative explanation for the current warming trend” (2007, p. 6). As the argument that humanity is the central cause of climate change gains momentum, it becomes necessary for humans to accept the requirement for a cultural change in perception towards the natural environment. It is here that my project finds part of its significance.

Photography focussing on the depiction of a bioregion, such as the project I have undertaken, contributes to both a psychological and practical shift in people’s understanding and approach towards the environment. Tolonen argues that “recent history suggests that photographs have the ability to influence our perceptions of land and consequently influence the ways we engage with it” (2012, p. 21) thus supporting the viewpoint that landscape photography can contribute to a long-term change in culture and behaviour in favour of more sustainable environmental practices. Whilst
investigation into the actual environmental practices of inhabitants of the Cape Range bioregion does not feature in this study, I believe my project contributes to the push for a cultural shift as my photographs depict the varying landscapes of a bioregion with a more even, or fairer, emphasis. It is my argument that using photography to create a more complete view of the bioregion of the Northwest Cape will help to develop a better understanding of the relationship between the Cape’s inhabitants and their environment. Essentially, what is significant about my project is that I promote a shift away from a culture of ecology concerned with protecting some areas of pristine nature and gaining mastery over other areas, toward an approach of living more sustainably by appreciating all environments within a bioregion.

**Limitations**

Aside from the more obvious constraints of scope surrounding a research project spanning less than a year’s duration, the largest limitation within a photographic project is presented by the use of photography itself. These limitations stem largely from what Tolonen suggests is “the artifice and subjectivity of the photographic image” (2012, p. 158). Indeed, a photographer cannot ever employ the use of a camera without injecting his or her subjective view of the world into the resulting photograph. Subjectivity manifests itself in almost every facet of the decision-making process of photography, from the photographer’s choice of subject, to the angle of the camera, to the time and location the photograph is taken, and the camera settings used. A photograph simply cannot be captured without an impression of the views and values of the camera’s controller resonating throughout. For a research project focused on achieving a level of impartiality to the collection of data, photography’s unavoidably subjective perspective on the world creates some insurmountable hurdles.
Photographic veracity is essentially what is at stake here. While the idea of photographic truth and objectivity has long been questioned, it is only relatively recently that photography’s ability to depict accurately what is in front of the lens has come under common scrutiny. This has arisen out of the advent of digital media and the ability of digital photo retouching technology to easily and indistinguishably alter the informational content of a photograph. Gunning views digital manipulation as a parasite on photographic accuracy: “the wonderful playfulness celebrated in the digital revolution remains parasitic on the initial claim of accuracy contained in some uses of photography” (2004, p. 41). As a means of somewhat reducing this concern digital photography has not been employed in my project, however the damage done to photographic veracity through digital manipulation cannot be completely mitigated and therefore requires acknowledgement.

Further limitations arise from the use of a case study methodology. While a case study affords greater degrees of specificity over tighter time frames, limitations surrounding data collection are apparent. A key component of data collection employed in my case study was interviewing inhabitants of the Cape Range subregion. Constraints of project size and scope limited the number of interviews to six, which not only restricted the amount and type of collectible data, but also meant personal opinion became more troublesome than it should be. Furthermore, it was always unlikely that six interviews could garner a usefully reflective (or even fair) sample of the opinions of the Cape Range community, adding further difficulties to an already problematic component. Ultimately it was deemed that, given the limitations, interviews contribute little in the
way of useful information, thus transcriptions of interviews have not been included or discussed.

A literature review has also been included as a means of identifying the historical, theoretical and aesthetic considerations of both landscape photography and bioregion in Western Australia. Further, this component investigates the correlation between the United States of America and Australia, chiefly in terms of the similarities in landscape photography but also through the investigation of the contemporary human history of the Cape Range region. However, while texts describing each of these aspects on a global level are abundant (notably American landscape photography), relevant texts related to Western Australia and, more specifically, the Cape Range subregion are limited, making this form of data collection difficult.

A larger limitation, however, lies within the lack of any reflection on the Aboriginal viewpoints and history of the region. While the Cape Range and Ningaloo Reef Management Plans do mention Aboriginal heritage of the region, citing important cave paintings and locations of aboriginal settlement, they also indicate an acute deficit of reliable historical data:

Indigenous cultural history and knowledge of the area has been poorly documented in literature, and that which does exist has in large part been written with a Eurocentric focus. This does not however mean that such knowledge does not exist amongst local Indigenous groups, and information may be withheld from broader distribution for a range of reasons. (Cape Range National Park Management Plan, 2010, p. 51).

The difficulty in finding reliable information on Aboriginal accounts of the region is exacerbated by an absence of an Aboriginal community in Exmouth. Local knowledge explains this as being due to indigenous spiritual beliefs regarding the site a place of bad spirits, a belief apparently developed as a result of a major cyclonic incident in the
region’s prehistory. It is likely that with more time reliable information could be compiled on the indigenous background of the region. However, once again time constraints make this impractical to pursue.

Further shortfalls in the photographic coverage of the Cape Range subregion arise out of a failure to document areas of human inhabitation other than Exmouth, most notably the northernmost town of Onslow, the southernmost town of Coral Bay and the outer-lying Muiron and Barrow group of islands. At over 25,000 square kilometres, covering a geographical area this size within a limited timeframe is a major limitation to photographic data collection. In terms of human populated areas, Exmouth is the largest urban centre in the subregion, and therefore arguably the most significant in terms of photographic depiction, especially considering its status as the premier tourist hub of the entire Gascoyne division. However, Coral Bay and Onslow possess historical depth, and reflection on these two locations should not be ignored. Furthermore, the Muiron and Barrow island groups have been recognised as important nature sites, so exclusion of these areas must also be considered a limitation on the overall study of the Cape Range sub-bioregion. Despite this, some attempts are made to cover this shortfall through data analysis of the ecological, economic and/ or historical aspects of the excluded regions.

**Research Aim and Questions**

The central aim of this research project was to photograph and document the four main landscapes of the Cape Range sub-bioregion (figure 1, 2): the town of Exmouth; Cape Range National Park; Ningaloo Marine Park; and the Harold E. Holt communications base. With this aim achieved, it is now the ongoing aim of the project to inform future
relationships between local contemporary inhabitants and the natural and cultural environments by providing a more complete depiction of the area as a bioregion.

The structure of the thesis adopts a research question model. Loosely, Milech and Schilo define a research question model as a project revolving around a central question (or questions), informing both the exegesis and the creative components (2004, p. 7). The ability to investigate research questions independently through both a creative project and the exegesis increases the opportunity for useful results, and is therefore more desirable. The three key research questions driving this thesis are as follows:

1. What are the aesthetic similarities and differences between each of the four components of the Cape Range subregion?
2. What is the dominant form of previously produced contemporary landscape photography of the Cape Range subregion?
3. What new approach to landscape photography could be used to affect the perceptions of the inhabitants of the Cape Range subregion?

In terms of addressing these questions, the first is dealt with primarily through a practice-led approach using photography. Question two and three are also answered through photographic practice. However, a textual analysis element is also included in the exegesis component.

**Methodology**

In order to adequately research and document the landscape of the Cape Range subregion, a qualitative case study methodology has been employed. Defined by Peter Swanborn simply as “the study of a social phenomenon in one or a few of its
manifestations in its natural surroundings during a certain period” (2010, p. 22), a case study has allowed the combination of various methods of data collection and exploration. As my aim was to photograph the landscapes of the Cape Range subregion of Northwest Australia, my approach was considered through a design of qualitative research inquiry. Maxwell describes a good qualitative research method as simply “one in which components work harmoniously together, [and which] promotes, efficient and successful functioning” (2005 p.2). Using this approach will provide the framework for data collection through practice-led research using photography and the analysis of existing literature on my topic.

A triangulation of methods was the initial desire for this project. Weerakody declares that “a case study is an in-depth study, so data collection should use all available sources of information” (2009, p. 238). It would be difficult to find flaws in this argument. However, as the interview component of the project failed to produce any useful results, and have been subsequently excluded from the final project, a triangulation approach to the methods has not been incorporated in the final project.

**Methods**

The majority of data collection for this case study occurred during a four-week field trip to the Northwest Cape of Western Australia. The photographic component documented the four main landscapes of the Cape Range subregion, and incorporated medium format (6x6) colour analogue photographs. Leaving aside my personal aesthetic preference for analogue photography, the decision to use this format of photography was based on the premise that medium format analogue photography uses a 60mm by 60mm square film stock, which is considerably larger than standard 35mm film stock.
Photographically this amounts to capturing more information, therefore improving results in terms of clarity and sharpness. Consideration was also given to whether or not to use the even larger format film stock of 120mm by 100mm. However, the increase in size does not justify the increase in difficulty in using such equipment and supplies, or the increase in post-production costs this type of photography commands.

**Theoretical Framework**

As discussed in earlier chapters, the theoretical framework supporting this project is based within cultural studies of American and Australian landscape photography. Critically, due to their prominence within the traditions of both photographies, there is a need to explore the aesthetic conventions of the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful, and their employment within photography of landscape from both a historical and contemporary perspective. With the sublime and picturesque featuring prominently in Australian landscape photographs, it is necessary to focus particular attention on these two visual experiences, examining their continuing contribution to the now deeply entrenched attitudes of mastery over the environment that continues today. Finally, with this ground covered, attempts are also made to shed light on the contemporary use of landscape photography in Australia, along with a consideration of photography’s future in relation to depicting landscape in an increasingly environmentally conscious world.

**Traditional Practices and Aesthetics of Landscape Photography**

Despite growing acceptance of the environmental issues humanity is now facing, the common view of landscape in the west is still largely centred around notions of mastery. Early European colonial landscape photography did much to establish this perspective of control and ownership over land, as James Ryan discusses when he
suggests that photography “both controlled space and the means of representing such control, on a global scale” (1997, p. 46). In declaring that once “miniaturised, the world could be imaginatively seen, explored and possessed” (p. 21), Ryan not only further stresses the point of landscape photography’s use in depicting mastery, but also highlights the use of photography as an aid to the west’s reconceptualisation of the world. Similarly, Giblett suggests in his discussion of American photography during the push to close the western frontier that “the aesthetic modes of the sublime and picturesque were instrumental in furthering these processes by rendering the land ‘settleable’ in photography and in fact” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 69). This statement suggests a cartographic application of early landscape photography (at least in America), something Chris Toalson concurs with in his argument that colonial photography gave frontier colonisation “an ‘accurate record’ of the western landscapes they were surveying, though the images themselves in many cases were carefully constructed to adhere to and perpetuate romanticised ideas” (2009, p. 29). Whether used for illustrating possession, aligning the collective mindset, or cartographic surveying, there emerges a pattern in landscape photography of empire employed as a political mechanism to depict the universal successes of colonisation (Ennis, 2007, p. 54). In effect, early landscape photography was largely a tool of early propaganda.

This raises questions around how the empirical propaganda machine used landscape photography to adapt western ideals and imaginations for embracing strange foreign lands. Simply, the romanticised landscape photography of colonisation incorporated the aesthetics of the sublime and the picturesque borrowed from earlier European schools of landscape painting. The definition given by Giblett for the picturesque depicting “well-formed depictions of serene scenery” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 70) adequately
describes this aesthetic trend, and as Ryan highlights, “by the 1860s the travel photographer in India could follow a well-trodden path made by… artists in search of the picturesque” (1997, p. 49). However, important is the alignment of the picturesque in landscape photographs with ideas of the mastery European powers were no doubt keen to establish in fledgling colonies. Often in photographs of tamed landscape “photographers commonly ‘rearranged nature… by moving a bush or felling a tree… in accordance with picturesque conventions” (Ennis, 2004, p. 92). Little more than brutish concern for composition on one hand, and on the other the physical removal and readjustment of components of the environment is mastery incarnate personified by photographers wielding not only cameras and tripods, but also axes and spades. The aesthetic devoted to “established picturesque iconography” (Ryan, 1997, p. 49) borrowed from European landscape painting and adopted into landscape photography not only established a tradition of depicting colonised landscapes through notions of control and mastery, but also contributed to the normalisation of environmental practices at once damaging and unsustainable that continue to the present day.

In contrast to picturesque ideas of serene, ordered nature, the sublime depicts the environment in all its awesome, untamed grandeur. In discussing the work of Ansel Adams (figure 11), arguably the most renowned producer of sublime landscape photography of North America, Giblett declares that “the sublime involves the depiction of formless and uplifting spectacles and produces feelings of awe and terror” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 70). The sublime in photography is an aesthetic devotion to the natural environment, one borne of reverence, and as such an aesthetic experience very different to the masterly depictions of the picturesque; while the picturesque connotes mastery, the sublime connotes respect. In referring to the efforts of the father of
conservation, John Muir (Adams’ literary counterpart), Giblett argues that “nature in general is sacralised… nature in mountains and forests was aestheticised and sublimated, especially if such areas we ‘set aside’ and preserved in the sanctuaries or modern cathedrals” (2011, p. 141) of national parks, or, as Belden Lane puts it, “the sublime as the monumental” (cited in Giblett, 2011, p. 143).

The iconic sublimated nature photographs created by Adams and other members of the F64 club were largely designed with conservation in mind, and credit must go to these photographers for their significant contribution to “helping to ‘save’ or conserve vast areas of ‘wilderness’” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 73). Paraphrasing Dunaway, Robertson believes that “finding the sublime in nature worked as a kind of emotional therapy for environmental reformers and other mostly middle-class twentieth-century Americans.” (2007, p. 242). More than that, these images were akin to religious idols, as alluded to by Deborah Bright, who states the American west was seen as “God’s gift to the American people” (1985, p. 3). Bright further illustrates this point by highlighting that the depiction of the:

American landscape as a primordial Eden was well suited to the conservative political climate of the 1940s and 50s. The nation was reveling in its reborn manifest destiny as the Cold War leader of the ‘free world.’ (1985, p. 5)

There can be little doubt photographers such as Adams and others of the F64 club contributed greatly to developing an attitude of respect for wilderness areas through their sublime depictions of national parks.

However, while aligned to conservation, and therefore seemingly more positively aligned with nature, this progress was not made without some damaging consequences. Firstly, the application of these images by the ‘Cold War leader of the free world’ to
military politics served to erode their cultural and social value. With Adams himself holding his photography up as icons for what America was fighting for, Giblett argues the environment was “thereby aestheticised, conscripted, and militarised… [and its] right to be conserved, as such, was diminished” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p.72). Secondly, and perhaps more damaging in the long term, was the lack of regard for areas of wilderness not in line with notions of the sublime. With a certain aesthetic set of landscapes endowed with sublimated, and therefore enhanced quality, all other lands to their detriment have become viewed not only as lesser, but as ‘fair game’ in the scramble for exploitation of the environment. As Giblett argues, “this is a compensatory and disavowing device for the exploitation of everywhere else” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 73). While it is doubtful practitioners of the sublime, or the picturesque for that matter, were aware of the damaging binary they were helping to instill at the time, it is precisely their disregard for the political implications of this approach to environmental depiction that created such a deeply entrenched attitude.

**New Topographies**

The first major shift away from landscape photography for the depiction of sublime landscapes of nature came to prominence in a 1975 exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*. Not only a radical departure from the dominant modes of sublime and picturesque nature photography, the show’s deadpan photographs of new suburban west of America also deviate in their tackling of the environmental politics of the day. Major proponents of New Topographies, notably the show’s curator William Jenkins, have frequently asserted that the photographers “take great pains to prevent the slightest trace of judgement or opinion from entering their work” (cited in Bright, 1985, p. 7). Indeed, it is difficult to argue against a much subtler
commentary present within New Topographic photographs. However, Deborah Bright highlights in her discussion on environmentalism in photography the ironic desire of the New Topographics to be seen through a scientific rather than artistic lens:

Jenkins proposed that the nine photographers in his exhibition represented American landscape in a radically new way, replacing Romantic and Symbolist styles with an impersonal, clinical objectivity... That this style of work was embraced as an authoritative new model for environmentally concerned photography is ironic, given that the photographers vociferously rejected any political agenda for their work and Jenkins refused to acknowledge the relevance of any content-based readings. (1992, p. 65)

Bright appears to make a valid point, but Sarah James, in discussing the Becher’s contribution to the New Topographics, counters this position by declaring that the “ideal of the camera's ability to depict truthfully, its power to represent absolutes, is redeemed precisely in its acknowledged failure to ever fully represent any truth” (2010, p. 67). Despite Jenkins’ arguments, it would seem a little naïve for renowned photographers, such as the likes of Stephen Shore, Robert Adams and Bert and Hilla Becher, who all possess an incisive mastery of photographic communication, to overlook the then growing acceptance of photography’s inherent inability to depict objective truth. Jonathon Green offers perhaps the most even-handed perspective of this argument, suggesting the issue may have arisen more out of a desire for disassociation rather than objectivity:

This claim to scientific objectivity and neutrality may be understood more as political gesture than as theory. It was an attempt to disassociate this work from the emotionalism and sentimentality of American popular photography. (1984, p. 166)

With such widespread debate over the political agenda of the New Topographics camp, there does seem to be a disconnect somewhere between what the photographers say and what the photographs say. In spite of all this, whatever commentary present within New Topographics photographs is, without question, subtle.
This subtlety stems largely from the aesthetic approach employed by the photographers, and, somewhat ironically, is at the heart of the power of signification the photographs possess. A further irony lies within New Topographics lineage with the frontier landscape photography of the late nineteenth century. As Alison Nordstrom notes, New Topographics is “an example of a contemporary landscape practice that continues the nineteenth-century topographic approach that combined fact and interpretation” (2010, pp. 74-75). While the obvious difference between the two schools of landscape photography is the replacement of grand vistas for the mundane monotony of the everyday suburban environment that had been popping up everywhere across North America since the end of World War II, New Topographics photographs present distinctly topographic, even cartographic sentiments. But rather than stunting the ability of the photographs to instill meaning in the audience, this “clinical objectivity” (Bright, 1985, p. 65) is actually where the photographs communicative strength lies. As Tolonen puts it, “they [the photographs] are both boring and interesting. The apparent emptying of meaning can provoke the audience into actions of signification” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 160). Everywhere the photographs depict plain, everyday scenes of suburban banality, and force nature into the background.

Tolonen also notes this theme of nature taking a back seat to the man-made environment evident in New Topographies when he argues “in the landscapes from the ‘New Topographies’ the form of the photograph was often amplified by the withdrawal of recognizable natural forms” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 166). This tension between nature and human domination of the environment is a challenge to the conventions of the preferred subject of the sublime glory of nature (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 158). While Bright does not contest this sort of position, she does argue that the sterilised
vacuum of the stark white gallery subverts an environmental reading of New Topographies:

art museums... do their best to subvert such readings. Modes of framing and hanging, neutral walls, minimal labeling... and a reverential hush provoke feelings of awe and respect before the images, even before we’ve inspected them closely. (1985, p. 7)

And she may have a point as the self-conscious atmosphere of a gallery must indeed go some way to disabling the power of signification in any photography, but in making this point, Bright then suggests that the environmental politics of 1970’s America provides a pre-given set of meanings to New Topographies:

These photographs entered a context in the mid-1970s when the founding of Earth Day and a potent environmentalist movement raised critical questions about sustainability of natural resources... This would have granted these photographs a pre-given set of meanings available to most politically liberal viewers that made aesthetic detachment all but impossible to sustain. (1985, p. 7)

Bright’s ultimate position, and the reason for her critical appraisal of the messages of New Topographies, is the assertion for a need for photography to contain more revelation before a more responsible interaction with the environment can occur (1985, p.8). Tolonen contests this argument suggesting that “a message of responsibility does not guarantee change” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 168). Instead, Tolonen argues that New Topographics’ more subtle comments of responsible interaction with the environment are less patronising than overt, and points to the exhibition’s sustained ability to hold the interest of society as testament to this. Audiences may respond better to a less patronising view of environmental issues. Equally, a more stirring tact might elicit greater environmental responsibility. In the following chapter, Australian photography will be examined and time will be spent considering both of these positions by investigating examples of each within an Australian context.
But first, further examination of the work of New Topographies should be undertaken through an analysis of one of the show’s most prominent photographers, Robert Adams. His photograph, *Tract House and Vegetable Garden*, taken in Longmont, Colorado, in 1973 (figure 3) was included in the original show and is an excellent example of the typically deadpan approach to form New Topographies is best known for. Certainly lacking any overtly expressive terminology, the photograph is far from devoid of commentary. For example, through the presence of mass-produced consumer items (tables, chairs, a barbeque) lies a comment on the environmentally insensitive throwaway culture prominent in the U.S. But what speaks louder is the suggestion of man’s influence over landscape, evoked by the dominance of the house, governing the natural forms of mountains (a common feature in sublime landscape photography from preceding eras). Nature is effectively relegated to an ever-diminishing position here, a position augmented by the telephone cables that further obscure and displace the once dominant stature of mountains in the environment. Man’s mastery over nature is again suggested through the futile vegetable patch, barren, alien and lost in such a man-altered landscape. Here Adams returns nature to the fore, but it returns in a perverted and ruined form, the result of the lawless (natural laws) hand of man. The destructive, perverse power humanity holds over nature seems clearly signified, despite these significations being invited by the same banality that at first arrests audience interaction. Rather than subtly suggesting passiveness, the photograph’s subtlety charges it with environmental commentary, notwithstanding attempts to avoid emotional provocation.

**Landscape Photography in Australia and Western Australia**

To a large degree the traditions of landscape photography in Australia have also been approached with the lens focussed on the subtle rather than the inflammatory. To put it
more accurately, Australian landscape photography has followed a similar trajectory to that of the United States, and like the United States, the politics of Australian landscape photography is also heavily entrenched in European aesthetic sensibilities of the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful. The familiar ideologies of ownership, mastery and successful colonisation depicted through predominantly picturesque, but also sublimated, scenes of nature are common themes running throughout Australian photography of landscape, and are used, as Giblett believes, “without regard for their politics” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 83). Rather than these effects being limited to early Australian settlement, Giblett argues that this approach to landscape has instilled a deeply ingrained outlook on the land that continues to this day:

The European landscape aesthetic produced the ways in which Europeans and their diaspora have seen and shaped the land through the percepts and practices of the gentleman’s park estate and the tourist’s package, national parks and wilderness, mining and pastoralism, and the ‘Bush’ of Australian mateship. (2004, p. 44)

It seems difficult to dispute that the contemporary economy of Australia, with its insatiable reliance on mining the country’s mineral wealth, stems from a European culture of environmental exploitation. However, it is not fair to say traditional Australian landscape photography was only concerned with mastery and ownership for economic gain. As we shall see, early photography also contributed to normalising the strange new frontiers.

While colonial success had arguably more political applications for empires at home and abroad, early photography of Australia also contributed to the more practical task of familiarising a strange new country for the empirical mindset, especially of colonials. As Ennis argues, offering “landscapes that were ordinary rather than awesome provided a measure of reassurance to settlers” (2007, p. 55), and was likely a key contributor to the popularity of the picturesque in Australia’s view-trade photography industry.
Indeed, the picturesque sits well in this position of offering “comforting, palatable images” (Ennis, 2007, p. 56), and Giblett’s citing of the dominance of the pictorialist period from the 1860’s through to the 1930’s as falling “firmly within the domain of the picturesque” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 88) is further testament to the prevalence of the picturesque. While the words “comforting” and “palatable” do not seem to sit well with the idea of an arid Australian landscape, the harsh, unfamiliar aspects of the Australian bush were largely ignored by early picturesque photographers, who instead sought out “a synthesis of nature and culture… ‘in which the ordered farms and estates bordered on wilderness’” (Ennis, 2004, p. 84). The “ordered farms”, arranged in picturesque mode and symbolising a successful colony and a mastered land, represent a highly effective way to promote the newly established extremities of the empire, both at home and abroad.

Clearly the picturesque dominated the early part of Australian landscape photography, but the sublime is arguably the dominant representational mode in Australia’s contemporary counterparts. The rise of wilderness photography in Australia in the 1980’s, which Giblett argues shares “a direct lineage with [Ansel] Adams” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 84) is, in simple terms, an invoking of the sublime in order to accentuate political messages of environmentalism and consumerist messages of tourism. As Ennis states, “the significance of wilderness photography is inextricably bound up with its effects on popular consciousness and political action” (2007, p. 68). Most noteworthy in respect to the politicisation of the Australian wilderness is Peter Dombrovskis’ work, in particular his iconic photograph *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend* (figure 4), to which both Ennis and Giblett call attention to. But while Giblett considers this photograph to be “a turning point in the production and consumption of
photographic images of Australian landscapes” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 94) for its embodiment of the mass consumption of landscape images, Ennis highlights it in her discussion around the importance of wilderness photography’s “contribution to debates about land and landscape” (2007, p. 68), stating:

Unlike any previous form of landscape photography, wilderness photography clearly enunciates a duty of care… an environmental position based on responsibility for and protection of the natural environment. (2007 p. 68)

Wilderness photography does indeed shine a spotlight on environmental conservation, perhaps more than any depiction of landscape before it, but at what cost?

Giblett holds a more critical view of the environmental credentials of wilderness photography than Ennis, arguing its aestheticising of certain landscapes is to the detriment of others. There can be little room for confusion over his interpretation of the “touristic landscape pornography” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 93) of Steve Parish’s wilderness photographs, in which he suggests that “the Earth is a young pornstar depicted in… classic feminine shape” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 95). Giblett’s leveling of the blame for unsustainable attitudes on wilderness photography’s creation of “images [that] exploit the land they photograph and create unrealistic expectations of aesthetically pleasing or aestheticised landscapes” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 100) is indeed convincing. The aesthetically pleasing landscape of the sublime and the picturesque continues to be, without question, a central component in the ubiquitous depiction of Australian landscape for the purposes of politics and tourism. It is therefore somewhat ironic that there is little consideration given to the damaging effects on efforts towards sustainability contained within the politics of these modes of representation.
While it appears there is conjecture over the usefulness and impact of wilderness photography in Australia, it is interesting to note the recent use of aerial photography to depict Australia’s landscapes. Citing a wilderness photographer of a different ilk to that of Steve Parish, Ennis refers to the work of Western Australian aerial photographer Richard Woldendorp (figure 5) as evidence of “the environmental consciousness that underpins wilderness photography” (2007, p. 68). Indeed, it is difficult to view Woldendorp’s sublimated bird’s eye perspectives of human impact on the environment without noting the environmental undertones running throughout. But it is the approach to the subject that is unique in Woldendorp’s work. Tolonen remarks on his use of “abstract rendering” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 171), arguing that:

> With society’s heightened environmental conscience… the ‘inkblots’ tend to reveal a country of an ancient… order that is in delicate balance. Woldendorp clearly calls into question the part that we play in this order. (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p.172)

Furthermore, on noting the departure from topographic accuracy in Woldendorp’s work, Tolonen believes “his framing choices render the landscape into abstract forms obscuring the content and materiality of the landscape” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 176). The abstract in the sublime may appear somewhat oxymoronic. However, the position held by Giblett of the sublime as an experience “lifting one above what is below” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 95) supports the notion of Woldendorp’s work as occupying the sublime; with Woldendorp the viewer is quite literally lifted above what is below, to the point of abstraction. While the sublime in Woldendorp’s work creates awe, the abstract partially counteracts it, instilling a sense of subtlety. Tolonen, in paraphrasing Woldendorp’s position regarding the documentary veracity of his work, suggests that “privileged perspective can provide insights into the evolution of the landscape, and invite questions about our position within it” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 176). However, these questions are raised with a degree of subtlety that, like New
Topographics before, offers a less judgmental view, and allows the audience more freedom to draw their own conclusions.

The aerial photography of Edward Burtynsky (figure 6), while similar to Woldendorp insofar as both photographers invoke the sublime to illustrate the impact of human activity on the wilderness of Western Australia, is anything but subtle. Perhaps an effect of the awe-inspiring, revelatory sentiments at play within Burtynsky’s photographs, the sublime wielded by Burtynsky seems more accessible than that of Woldendorp’s. But whatever the case, a different visual experience is indeed invoked. Tolonen argues that “romantic aesthetics of the picturesque and the sublime have traditionally played on the side of the environmentalists” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 196) and cites Dombrovskis as a far more familiar example of the sublime than Burtynsky’s rendering of ruined landscapes. Essentially Burtynsky reconceptualises the sublime through harnessing “the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place… while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability of inspire awe”, in what Jennifer Peeples terms the “toxic sublime” (2011, p. 375). Unsurprisingly, Peeples highlights the criticism Burtynsky’s photographs come under for their “exaltation of the industries that create the contamination” (2011, p. 376), suggesting that “the toxic sublime produces dissonance by simultaneously showing beauty and ugliness” (2011, p. 377). However, interpreting “damaged landscapes in new ways” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 195) into terrifying and disconcertingly beautiful images, offers both a revelatory position from which these environments can be considered, and an accepting eye to the destructive force of humanity on the environment. This idea of acceptance of the toxic sublime does appear at the outset to be in line with any position of sustainability. However, Giblett’s call for a shift toward “sacrality of all places, rural and urban, pristine and spoiled”
(2007, p. 343) is in chorus with some of the messages running through Burtynsky’s photographs. Ultimately Burtynsky’s work both erodes and realigns the traditional ideologies held within the aesthetics of landscape depiction through images. By borrowing from landscape photography’s aesthetic conventions of the sublime and picturesque, Burtynsky undermines them, and in doing so his work contributes to the push for a shift away from unsustainable approaches toward the environment.

Figure 4. Peter Dombrovskis, *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Frankland River, Southwest Tasmania*, 1979.
Figure 5. Richard Woldendorp, *Plough Patterns Drawn by the Farmer After the Rains*, Western Australia, 1997.

Figure 6. Edward Burtynsky, *Silver Lake Operations #2, Lake Lefroy*, Western Australia, 2007.
Ecological Conservation and Sustainability

In exploring the influence landscape photography has had on western attitudes toward the environment, sooner or later the institutions (or industries) of National Parks and tourism require investigation. Likewise, the contribution photography could make to changing established codes that surround the environment means engaging with literature devoted to ecological sustainability and bioregionalism. This section deals with all of these topics; from an investigation into contemporary knowledge around bioregional sustainability, to the traditional notions of conservation through the establishment of National Parks, and their part in the development of the tourism industry. The conclusion articulates the negative impacts of traditional conservation methods on both the environment and the western mindset, and in doing so also illuminates a pathway to a better appreciation for environments of all kinds, beyond simple sustainability toward mutuality.

Bioregionalism and Sustainability

As discussed earlier, European and American aesthetics of nature developed through landscape photography have helped establish a deeply entrenched drive for mastery over the natural environment. Environmental mastery essentially functions through two opposing forces: the destruction of some environments for social, economic and military gain; and the exemplifying of others as ‘too special’ to ruin. While the first is a destruction of the environment, the second conserves it, and while the former appalls, the latter appeases, serving to exonerate humans of their sense of guilt for any wrongdoing. Giblett argues for both ecological conservation practices and for “a shift from the setting aside of special places in sanctuaries, such as national parks, to the sacrality of all places, rural and urban, pristine and spoiled” (2007, p.343).
here is Giblett’s choice of the word, “place”, which connotes something quite different from the word environment. Furthermore, the tags ‘rural’, ‘urban’, ‘spoiled’ and ‘pristine’ for that matter are all conceptual symptoms of the cause, not the cause itself. The cause is evident in Giblett’s critique of the very concept of environment, believing it not only “implies separation between humans and the Earth, but also a relationship of mastery over, and enslaving of, the Earth” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 228). The binary created between human and Earth by the concept of environment is fundamental to the environmental issues we now face, and it appears clear to Giblett at least that the push for change should start with the collapsing of this separation.

Similarly, Mackenzie sees contemporary environmental issues as stemming from a divide between humanity and the Earth at the conceptual level, and cites the conflict between traditional European notions of mastery with indigenous environmental ideology to illustrate his point. Indigenous values, Mackenzie argues, revolve around a belief of belonging to the environment. He positions Australian aboriginals as exemplars of this system, suggesting they “view themselves as part of the land” (1988, p. 265). This idea is in line with Wilson’s comment that for American indigenous groups “the natural world is not a refuge – the ‘other’ to an urban industrial civilization – but a place that is sacred in and of itself” (1991, p. 25). Unlike living in or on the environment, belonging to the Earth alludes to a far more symbiotic relationship between man and nature, a suggestion McGinnis, in citing Dunning, uses to support his call for a cultural alignment with indigenous land values:

"Bioregionalism is not a new idea but can be traced to the aboriginal, primal and native inhabitants of the landscape. Long before bioregionalism entered the mainstream lexicon, indigenous peoples practiced many of its tenets." (1999, p. 2)
Living in symbiosis with nature, in relationships reminiscent of nomadic hunter-gatherer cultures of the pre-colonial new world, may be the ideal for true environmental sustainability. But in reality for most nations this way of life is simply no longer feasible. However, the point McGinnis is making here is more concerned with the fundamental approach of bioregionalism toward the environment and the alignment of these with traditional indigenous ideals. Essentially a push toward sustainable practices needs to be based within an ideological framework that has these values at its core.

But what is bioregionalism, and how can it offer a more sustainable approach to the world? Daniel Berthold-Bond traces its first use to 1974, citing Berg and Dasmann’s “idea of ‘living-in-place,’ which they define as ‘following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site, and evolving ways to ensure long-term occupancy of that site’” (2000, p. 6). Giblett perhaps offers a more tangible definition of the term, as “a geomorphological and biological region… where or on which one lives and works, and which sustains one’s life” (2004, p. 221). Further, he places this concept within a spectrum of human interaction with the environment in *Photography and Landscape*, arguing that the “relationship is situated on a continuum between mutually beneficial and ‘normal’ biological and psychological *symbiosis* and mutuality at one end, and parasitical and psychotic mastery at the other” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 229). Humanity operates (or has operated) at all levels of this gamut of relationships, and there is much physical and psychological work required before a concerted movement away from the psychotic toward symbiotic is achieved. But understanding fundamentals of bioregional psychology is the cornerstone of fostering a new outlook toward true sustainability.
In practical terms, however, simply understanding humanity’s place in the sphere of bioregional ideology does not necessarily provide the tools for executing the messages it holds. In his essay ‘From The Parts to the Whole: Systems of Thinking in Ecology and Education’ Fritjof Capra argues that people must develop an understanding of ecological principles:

To understand the lessons of ecosystems and apply them to our human communities, we need to learn the principles of ecology, the ‘language of nature.’ We need to become ecologically literate. (1994, p. 1)

Capra’s “language of nature”, what he terms “Ecoliteracy,” places bioregionalism’s beliefs into a practical framework, one with the potential for designing “sustainable societies by modeling them after nature's ecosystems” (2005, p. 19). He further suggests the need for people “to think in terms of connectedness and relationships, and context” (1994, p. 3), an idea at the heart of Giblett’s position that “environmental sustainability comes down to everyday land practices in local places involving… symbiotic livelihoods in bioregions” (2007, p. 343). Essentially, both Capra and Giblett speak in unison, from a position that recognises the need to reestablish humanity’s lost relationship with the planet and its natural systems.

The concept of bioregionalism is not without its critics, however. The cultural application of bioregionalism away from a global perspective has been labelled a narrow-minded barrier to international conservation priorities. John Ryan argues that bioregionalism’s attempts to transform the cultural space around environment have not been fully theorised, and as such are often misconstrued (2012, p. 80). In what he terms “circumscribing culture within ecological boundaries” (2012, p. 80), the misapplication of bioregional ideologies risks a negative impact on its potential as a positive transformative influence on the cultural and practical interactions humans have with the
earth. Ryan’s solution to this is to redefine the term bioregion “as an ecologically
designated space imbued with aesthetic and ethical significance” (2012, p. 81) arguing
“bioregional place develops at the nexus of space, aesthetics, and ethics, that the
interaction between the three can sustain bioregional sense of place” (2012. p.80). His
point rests on recognising the concept of human awareness of nature, suggesting
bioregionalism is the act of “local life [being] aware of itself in its natural setting”
(2012. p. 82). Wild creatures possess an inherent awareness of their surroundings, but
humanity’s lost relationship with the environment dictates a requirement for
‘reinhabiting’ places previously damaged by ecological disruption. Ryan has a strong
point for redefining bioregionalism in support of a better understanding of its principles,
arguing that criticism often over-simplifies it as “a naïve branch of radical ecology”
(2012, p. 83), associating bioregionalism with early 20th century environmental
determinism and the stigmas that go with it. Ryan’s stance in defense of bioregionalism
however is that “human cultural definition from within the bioregion plays as large a
role in the identity of place, as do biogeographical borders” and that “reinhabitation…
implies the decision of a culture to align itself with regional nuances” (2012, p. 84).
Crucially, Ryan raises the ethical impact bioregional borders and reinhabitation have on
relationships between people and place, and the intrinsic importance of these concepts
to the sustainable realignment of human practices and bioregions.

The human world has become severed from the natural and the current relationship,
based on deeply entrenched ideas of domination and mastery, has in many cases pushed
the Earth to the edge of ecological collapse. This is a dark thought indeed, but McGinnis
suggests that acting in a more symbiotically conscientious way can “be a therapeutic
device to get us back into the ‘field’, to foster identification with other life-forms and to
rebuild a community with nature” (1999, p. 7). In plain terms, the moment people return to nature the severed relationship is reestablished, allowing for a re-identification with nature. Similarly Grange believes a reestablishment of intimate relationships with nature is needed to foster sustainable change:

Home is the region of nearness within which our relationship to nature is characterized by sparing and preserving... Human homecoming is a matter of learning to dwell intimately with that which resists our attempts to control, shape, manipulate and exploit. (Grange, cited in McGinnis, 1999, p. 1)

What Grange is referring to is a departure from mastery. In the traditional western mindset, “that which resists” us in nature requires mastering. But in doing so man has abandoned Mother Nature, as all adults do upon reaching maturity. However, in this mutated case, abandonment risks destruction of the mother to the detriment of all living things. Little choice therefore exists but for man to forego mastery and reestablish the lost maternal relationship.

Relinquishing control of nature and moving towards the sustainable are no doubt positive steps, but Giblett argues these are only partial steps in the right direction. Ultimately he calls for a movement beyond just sustainability, toward a relationship of mutuality:

Rather than environmental sustainability, a more intimate and reciprocal relationship of mutuality with the Earth means providing enough for all, including humans and other creatures on the Earth, and the Earth, forever. (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 228)

This, however, may seem a futile position, given the current environmental situation at least. But irrespective of whether the call is realistically achievable or not, Giblett poses an extremely valid point, and his definition of this drastic shift in ecological terms shapes the idea of mutuality into a more tangible form:
In conservation and ecology this entails a shift from the setting aside of special places in sanctuaries, such as national parks, to the sacrality of all places, rural and urban, pristine and spoiled. (2007, p. 343)

Giblett appears unconvinced of the solutions sustainability offers. Sustainability connotes something akin to improving the status quo or, at worst, survival only, while mutuality suggests an all-embracing interaction founded on plenitude between the Earth and all its inhabitants. But while sustainability in itself poses huge hurdles, Giblett’s alternative of mutuality is a truly revolutionary – and therefore massive – task. His call for mutual over sustainable indicates concerns about whether or not a set of environmentally sustainable systems based on imbalanced relationships would foster a truly beneficial situation for all living things. As the scientific evidence mounts, the argument is becoming clearer that in order for humanity, and the rest of the planet’s living organisms for that matter, to live in abundance, a revolutionary ecological system of human living must be created. This starts with sustainability, which in turn starts with shifting human appreciation for the Earth. Sustainability is by no means the final chapter in reestablishing human relationships with the planet, but it is a worthy goal for the next few generations.

**Traditional Practices: National Parks and Tourism**

Sustainability and bioregionalism are contemporary approaches to a more positive environmental awareness. And while sustainability includes conservation, Giblett suggests the sanctifying of only unique places of nature in the form of national parks is perhaps not the most sustainable approach (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 73). The contemporary view of National Parks has remained largely unchanged since “the father of American national parks” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 72), John Muir, began successfully campaigning for the preservation of large swathes of wilderness in 1870’s.
In response to Muir’s efforts, Alfred Runte explains that the U.S. congress “pledged its commitment to scenic preservation… [but] the ambitions of American materialism still favoured development over the ideals of conservation” (1979, p. xiii). Irrespective of the capitalistic overtones, for a time when wilderness was seen almost universally as something to be exploited for economic gain, or at best in requirement of taming, this declaration seems a positive step forward. However, in regards to the early American push for conservation Giblett argues that “the commons, owned by none and shared by all, were colonized in public lands such as national parks, and enclosed in private terms such as ‘refuge’ and ‘sanctuary’” (2011, p. 141). The point here is that notions of ownership were applied to previously unclaimed lands. In terms of conservation, which he argues is more accurately deemed “sanctuarism” (2004, p. 125), Giblett sees the concept of land ownership as invoking “three competing conceptualizations and objectivisations of nature” (2004, p. 146): preserving; aestheticising; and commodifying.

The preservation of national parks, aestheticised by romantic depictions of the sublime and pristine led, in part, to their commodification through the phenomenon of mass tourism. In celebration of wilderness, pilgrimages to what Dean MacCannell calls “outstanding features of the landscape” (1999, p. 80), have become commonplace following the sanctification of wilderness areas. Ellen Strain calls the development of mass tourism “the product of a burgeoning world-view which neared maturity by the turn of the century” (1996, p. 72), suggesting the tourist was positioned within the same sphere “of mastery such as the explorer” (1996, p. 72). This commodification of wilderness for wilderness’s sake, Wilson believes, signifies a “shift from a pastoral approach to nature to a consumer approach” (1991, p. 24), suggesting that:
Tourism is a phenomenon that is both urban and rural, and at the same time it breaks down the distinction between the two. It has vastly reorganized not only the geography of North America [and the world] but also our perceptions of nature and our place in it as humans. (1991, p. 20)

Wilson builds on this point of the national park as consumer commodity by noting the connection between tourism and the increase in leisure time arising out of the industrial revolution (1991, p. 20). It is difficult to doubt that national parks are more consumerist than conservationist, the myriad package holidays to countless ‘isolated’ locations of natural wonder, the ‘experience’ of a site of ‘natural beauty’, the consumer products required to make the feat as comfortable as possible. The immense industry that has grown up around tourism of the natural environment is itself a clear testament to the capitalistic origins of the National Park. Giblett’s statement that “the car did more than conservationists to create national parks” (2011, p. 160) sums up this point with an almost comic irony. While Muir’s first petitioning for conservation was borne of a genuine interest in environmental protection, it was not until the machine of industrial capitalism began turning in this direction that his ideas took hold. In this sense capitalism is simultaneously destroyer and preserver of the environment, but only as long as profits can be made.

But there could be more to the issue of conservation than nature’s profit making potential. MacCannell argues that the issue may be more psychological than fiscal:

The national parks are symptomatic of guilt which accompanies the impulse to destroy nature. We destroy on an unprecedented scale, then in response to our wrongs, we create parks which re-stage the nature/society opposition now entirely framed by society. The great parks are not nature in any original sense. They are marked off, interpreted, museumized nature… As a celebration of nature, the park is the ‘good deed’ of industrial civilization… By restricting ‘authentic’ or ‘historic’ nature to parks, we assert our right to destroy everything that is not protected by the Park Act. (1992, p. 115)
Once again the binaries between destruction and preservation arise. But this time, in discussing appeasement of guilt through celebrating nature, MacCannell alludes to humanity’s collective sense of abandonment of the Earth. Recognising this, humanity offers tokens of contrition in the form of national parks, healing some of the earth’s wounds, but also justifying further destruction. Wilson’s suggestion that advanced development could be key to the rise of tourism and the modern appreciation for natural environments bears similar comparison:

The love of nature flourishes best in cultures with highly developed technologies, for nature is the one place we can both indulge our dreams of mastery over the Earth and seek some kind of contact with the origins of life. (1991, p. 25)

A love of nature in societies deprived of it, guilt over abandonment of mother nature, and the sociopathic destruction of landscape despite all this points to a much more malignant relationship between man and nature than a simple preoccupation with profits. Greed and economic interest have certainly played a fundamental role in the commodification of landscape, in both the preservation and destruction of it. But the issue should now be concerned less with the origins of aestheticising landscape and more with the deep-seated, unsustainable perspective these origins have instilled in the collective mindset, and how this perspective can be realigned.

But what of photography’s part? Photography is, after all, a machine born of the industrial age. Supporting the industrial machine that grew around conservation, Strain cites early photography as integrating “distant locales into commodity relations by selling the less industrialized world as visual pleasure” (1996, p. 75). But what is worse is that the implementation of photography to develop this set of aesthetic codes has created a damaging viewpoint toward environment. As Giblett sees it, “touristic and wilderness images exploit the land they photograph and create unrealistic expectations
of aesthetically pleasing or aestheticised landscapes that bear little relation to the lives of people” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 228). These unrealistic expectations, aside from placing pressure on environments imbued with positive visual messages, also damage those landscapes devoid of ‘pleasing’ characteristics. While blame cannot be levelled solely at wilderness photography for creating unsustainable expectations on environments, it is a key contributor and continues to serve the notion, whether contemporary wilderness photographers are conscious of it or not, of the earth as sanctuary, and therefore a commodity to be exploited as any other. Almost as soon as photography was invented commercial practitioners busied themselves with depicting nature through the aesthetics of the sublime and picturesque with profit in mind, and through wilderness photography these representational modes continue to dominate today. Yet while the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque are satisfying and alluring to behold (and buy), what hope do they give for landscapes of the unpleasant, the unfortunate and the ugly? These aesthetic conventions have no place within the capitalist structure of beauty products. An ugly nature does not sell.

The Northwest Cape

Tourism, including the aestheticised images that accompany it, has developed into one of the chief reasons for the increasing attention the Northwest Cape now receives. The region is both fortunate and unfortunate in this respect, insofar as much of its natural environment occupies the visual language of the sublime and the picturesque. Fortunately this attention raises concerns over sustainability, but questions remain over how pressing these issues might be without such international focus, not to mention the impact on the Cape’s places of ugliness and unpleasantness. Like any other bioregion, the Cape Range accommodates an array of environments, beautiful and ugly. This
section is devoted to specific consideration of the Northwest Cape, from conservation, touristic and bioregional viewpoints to its military past and the wider anthropological influences. As well as this, argument is raised over the environmental future of the region through the investigation of governmental management plans in an attempt to highlight the conflicting interests between efforts to increase regional environmental sustainability and efforts to increase regional economic prosperity, both of which the Australian government declares commitment to.

**Environmental Background: Tourism and Sustainability**

With a population of almost 2000 permanent residents, Exmouth is the Cape Range subregion’s largest area of human inhabitation. Officially opened in 1967 to cater for the requirements of the US controlled Harold E. Holt Communications Base, its population has remained small, but this belies an important role played by the town, one very different to its original function. The region is now a focus of major tourism interests and, for at least the last 15 years, Exmouth has been earmarked as the predominant development site, as indicated in the 1998 Exmouth-Learmonth Structure plan:

> Over the next 30 years, the Gascoyne Region will become the State’s premier water-based and environmental tourism area. The Ningaloo Marine Park will be the major attraction on the North West Cape... Exmouth provides the focus for future development in the region. (Arnold, A. 1998, p. 5)

Given that the Gascoyne is comprised of six sub-bioregions, this is a big statement, both in terms of the economic importance of the Cape, and the human impact it implies.

The ascendancy of the Northwest Cape as a bioregional heavyweight effectively equates to a doubling of its population during Whale Shark season (early June through to October). Obviously this brings large demands on the environment, and the *Cape Range*
Management Plan points out that “pressure for substantial developments has intensified over recent years due to the growth in tourism” (2010, p. 140). However this increased focus has also brought prosperity. A recent Rangelands National Resource Management report suggests “the expansion of the tourism industry has been a major driver of the growth in the region over the last decade” (Human Use of Rangelands Report, 2009, p. 34). The shift in the core economic base of Exmouth has had a trickle down effect on other local industries, with the same report citing tourism as responsible for sparking a rise in demand for construction, food, administration, accommodation, retail and manufacturing industries (2009, p. 33). While the original purpose of the town was to serve the military communications base located nearby, since the establishment of the Cape Range National Park in 1965 and Ningaloo Marine Park in 1987, Exmouth has rapidly transformed into one of the state’s biggest tourism centres and a site of international interest. It is of little wonder that people are flocking in droves, considering the geographical characteristics of the peninsula. A double drawcard, the 300kms of pristine Ningaloo Reef, beginning at the northern tip of the Gulf of Exmouth, abuts the entire length of the Cape Range, creating a unique testament to the wonder of Australia’s outback. Combined with warm winters and seasonally returning Humpback and Whale Shark populations, the Northwest Cape offers visitors an experience of a lifetime in a desert paradise. With such pristine and unique natural environment to explore, it is hardly any wonder that the reef and the range now garner so much international attention.

But it is largely because of the increased attention the area now receives that the question of sustainability has gained momentum. In response to this, the Gascoyne Development Committee (GDC) has aligned itself to sustainability, declaring in the
values and principles section of its strategic plan that “the GDC seeks to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of our natural environment, our quality of life, and our Region’s economy” (2010, p. 8). Further commitments to establishing sustainable practices are outlined in key objectives to assist “communities to plan for a sustainable economic and social future.” (2010, p. 7). These statements appear positive, and some reassurance can be gained just from the fact that an economically motivated organisation acknowledges the need for a sustainable approach, but therein lies an issue of contention. The GDC is ultimately concerned with expanding the region’s economy (chiefly through tourism), and its claim of a desire to instill sustainable practices is likely the result of a desire to maintain the region’s economy: its environment. This argument is bolstered by an absence of any mention of sustainable practices in the tourism section of the report, while a desire to increase an already large and diverse tourism industry is clearly outlined. The disparity between the GDC’s message risks tainting its claim of alignment to sustainability, reducing it to little more than buzzword rhetoric. What is most concerning here is the very real possibility for the question of sustainability to remain little more than a topic of discussion for years to come.

It is perhaps unfair to tarnish an economic body with the environmentally complacent brush. After all, an organisation charged with the economic interests of a region should not necessarily be expected to possess extensive data on the region’s environmental issues. These responsibilities fall upon the Department of Environment and Conservation and, to its credit, within the last decade at least three government-funded environmental reports have been published on the Northwest Cape. The 2010 Cape Range National Park Management Plan (2010), the North West Marine Bioregional Plan (2008), and the Cape Range Subregion report (2002) all contain extensive data on
the environmental condition of the area. Custodial responsibility of unique sites of ecological value naturally fall upon governments to manage, and it is clear that the Australian government takes this obligation seriously:

By 2020, the park and the Ningaloo Marine Park will be formally recognised amongst the world’s most valuable conservation and nature based tourism icons. The conservation values of the park will be in better condition than at present. This will have been achieved by reducing stress on ecosystems to promote their natural resilience, and facilitating sustainable visitor use. (Cape Range National Park Management Plan, 2010, p. ii)

This type of commitment to environmental protection as outlined in the Vision of Cape Range Management Plan has come to be expected within sanctified sites of nature. Far from acting irresponsibly in this respect, the government has gone to extensive lengths to not only repair previous damage, but to also ensure the future survival of these places on the Northwest Cape by promoting sustainable practices within the parks.

But while the Cape Range Management Plan and the North West Marine Bioregional Plan both offer wide-ranging information on strategies toward key management issues ranging from tourism, to water management, to climate change and species population protection, these problems only relate to areas falling within the boundaries of the Cape Range or Ningaloo Reef. The environments that fall outside these sanctified zones are left largely unmentioned (with the exception of Exmouth). As such, these reports are developed out of an ideology of preserving, not sustaining. While sustainability is mentioned in relation to tourism, the very concept of the national park is an expression of preservation, creating a binary that the rest is fair game. Giblett argues that the setting aside of national parks is an anthropocentric act “because it represents power over nature by the very act of setting aside” (2004, p. 160). At best these plans represent a genuine acknowledgement of the fragility of the region’s ecosystems and the responsibility the government has to protect them, at worst they symbolise little more
than an effort to maintain the status quo of sacralised landscape in consolation for ravaged earth (it can hardly be coincidence that the Cape Range National Park was declared just two years before the establishment of the Harold E. Holt Communications base). There is no question these reports are both positive and necessary, but their outlook remains based on outmoded and ultimately unsustainable attitudes of environmental mastery. Ultimately, the management plans speak for only a small portion of the Cape’s environment.

In order to ensure a truly sustainable future for the Northwest Cape, management of its environments must be viewed from a bioregional perspective. In support of this position Giblett invokes the concept of symbiosis, arguing that “a bioregion always sustains our livelihood in relationship with the living earth (2012, p. 229; emphasis in original). The Cape Range Subregion report differs from management plans in this respect. A prime example is the land use component which cites all major land uses from native pasture grazing, to mining, to urban and conservation areas (2002, p. 69). This holistic view of the interaction between human and environment indicates the report is built around a bioregional perspective. Furthermore, the report documents environmental concerns across the entire sub-bioregion, outlining compelling evidence to suggest extensive ecological damage caused by farming, introduced animal species, mining operations and tourism activities, as well as offering suggestions to the government for environmental restoration, such as the acquisition of pastoral leases to ensure better management (2002, p. 76). The fact that a major report of this nature approaches the area of study from the perspective of bioregion is an important step in the move toward sustainable management of the Cape Range environments.
These points should not suggest the government does nothing to sustainably manage the environment outside national parks, but the picture they draw indicates the issue is more a result of conflicting interests between economic development and environmental sustainability. Water, for example, is of primary importance to any bioregion, and in desolate areas with fragile ecosystems such as the Northwest Cape, water “requires careful control and management” (Exmouth Townsite Structure Plan, 2010, p. 28). Exmouth’s fresh water is supplied solely by a subterranean aquifer, which is both ecologically significant for the rare animal life it also supports, and vulnerable to over consumption. The meteorological patterns of Australia’s Northwest can be extreme, ranging from virtually no rain to cyclonic. Typically, rainfall takes many years to reach subterranean aquifers, but the Cape is unique in that the rains reach underground water within a matter of days. Despite this, the region’s climate is arid, and while water consumption is currently at a sustainable level, projected population and tourism growth over the next 10 years means “the availability of groundwater on a sustainable basis is questionable” (Exmouth-Learmonth Structure Plan, 1998, p. 49). The government is therefore considering other options for water sources, namely the establishment of a desalination plant, but this obviously poses some significant questions surrounding the sustainability of the marine environment. To the government’s credit, neither a desalination plant nor an increase in groundwater consumption has been agreed upon. However, the increasing developmental pressures placed on the environment, both above and below the surface, are in clear competition with efforts to establish sustainable practices in the Northwest Cape. Documents published by government departments do express genuine concern over environmental issues, and in many cases well-planned efforts are made to both protect environments and reverse environmental
damage. But it is an unfortunate fact that developmental needs often ‘win out’ over environmental needs in the end.

**Military Background: Cold War and Demilitarisation**

With the exception of the odd pastoral station peppering the landscape, large-scale development of the Northwest Cape was almost nonexistent up until the second half of the 20th century. And when modern industrial civilisation did come, it was a product of North American Cold War military expansion. A location of strategic importance on the global stage, in 1967 the Cape’s first truly large establishment of infrastructure came in the form of the Harold E. Holt military communications station (“History and Tourism”, Shire of Exmouth, 2008). But the establishment of the station, the military base nearby and the support town of Exmouth has caused the Cape to become inextricably linked to the global domination North American nuclear strategy.

The communications station and base is a by-product of the Cold War. Concerns over a nuclear China and the spread of communism in South East Asia, coupled with a desire to strengthen U.S. allegiances, meant Australian politicians during the late fifties and sixties were quite open to the prospect of an American controlled military base on Australian soil. A strong American influence “backed by nuclear weapons” (Albinski, 1965, p. 34) in the region not only meant a strong deterrent against global war but also, more often than not, the settlement of local issues in Australia’s favour. While the Menzies government remained committed to a nuclear free southern hemisphere, and therefore the position that no nuclear weapons would be housed in Australia (despite conjecture in the media over the veracity of this statement), the communications base essentially functioned as a “contribution to the deterrent” to southern hemisphere
nuclear proliferation (Albinski, 1965 p. 34). But the result of this was the inexorable link between the future of the Northwest Cape and the Cold War military strategies of the United States.

While perhaps not in the same league as, for example, the nuclear testing sites of the Nevada desert, the Cape’s relationship to nuclear North America renders it more than a typical industrial wasteland. In this respect (figuratively speaking at least) areas of the Cape have become transformed into what Giblett calls a de facto nuclear wasteland (pers. comm.) For Giblett, the wasteland is a “feral quaking zone” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 203), a term he develops from American poet and naturalist Henry Thoreau’s quaking zones of the bog, mire, marsh and swamp. Giblett uses feral quaking zones to define the human created wastelands of a greedy industrial capitalism (or in the Cape’s case a greedy military industrial complex) that has consumed the earth and regurgitated it as waste (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 205). In this sense, the spoiled earth literally quakes, and the visitor experiences terror. Quaking zones are:

Landscapes where the earth quakes and terror is experienced as a result of the inscription of modern industrial technology on the surfaces and depths (and sometime heights) of the body, earth and mind. (Giblett, 2011, p. 203)

In contrast to native quaking zones, which are places of naturally occurring melancholy, death and decomposition, Giblett sees the feral quaking zone as a place where “the natural elements of earth, air, fire and water have not only been displaced from their proper places and disrupted from their creative mixtures, but have also been mixed destructively” (2012, p. 3). Both the feral and the native quaking zone instill terror, but while the native is a terrible place of natural creation, it is the feral that is a terrible site of human destruction.
In similar tones, Giblett invokes Albert Camus’ position that the industrial and military application of modern science threatens total destruction of the earth (or at least threatens to turn the entire earth into a feral quaking zone) arguing that “the land and the future have been colonised and militarized” (Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 206). Not only does the proliferation of destructive human force on a mass scale already reach the ends of the earth, but in a world where total annihilation is a conceivable and ever-present threat, humanity has been deprived of a sense of future. What is the point of being concerned with future issues if it could all be over tomorrow? One may argue that the Cold War is a remnant of the past, not a prospect of the future, and the fear of nuclear apocalypse is yesterday’s fear. But there is still the threat of mass destruction; today we tremble over the ‘war on terror’ (in all its ambiguity). The fear of annihilation remains, as do the landscapes created to both prevent and proliferate annihilation.

While the threat of nuclear conflict and the fear of communism has declined since the Cold War, Northwest Australia remains a strategically important location. John Bradford, in The Maritime Strategy of the United States: Implications for Indo-Pacific Sea Lanes, outlines the continued importance of the region to North America:

In November 2010, Australia and the United States announced the establishment of a new bilateral working group to examine the possibility of enhanced US-Australian cooperation on Australian soil… Australia’s location near the critical Indo-Pacific sea lanes… will likely make such options more attractive. (2011, p. 193)

Add to this Australia’s close economic and existing military ties with the United States, and a clear picture develops surrounding the future prospects of American military involvement in the region. The intent to increase U.S. military presence has been voiced as recently as 2012, with Aljazeera correspondent Jon Lettman reporting “a new US military expansion in Australia in autumn 2011”, citing President Obama’s stance that “‘The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay’” (2012). Lettman goes
on to outline the intended build up of American military troops and arsenal in Australia's north, which is intended to continue until 2016. And discussion around an even larger US military presence in the form of an American base in the Cocos Islands is also outlined in Lettman’s report:

The remote atoll – Australian territory, southwest of Indonesia – is being eyed as a base to monitor south Asia and the South China Sea. A drone base here would be attractive to the US, as it's more than 2,400km closer to the South China Sea than the US naval base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. (Lettman, 2012)

Despite the end of the Cold War, and diminished fears surrounding communism, Australia’s close political relationship with the United States, and its proximity to major Asian shipping lanes suggests the likelihood of an increasing U.S. military presence on Australian soil.

Despite the proposed build-up of U.S. military in the north, the Northwest Cape appears to be in a state of demilitarisation. Since the mid 70’s the United States began relinquishing control of the facility, and management gradually moved to the Royal Australian Navy. By 1993 the base was completely Australian Navy operated, and since then the site has undergone further demilitarisation, with management contracts awarded to private sector defence companies, such as Raytheon, who now handle almost complete control of the station’s operations (Australian Defence Magazine, 2012). Manuel De Landa’s claim that “distinctions between a purely civilian sector and a military area of the economy were impossible to draw” (1991, p. 111) as far back as World War II may provide some explanation for the privatisation of the facility, but it is common local knowledge that the base now operates with a skeleton staff. And with many buildings inside the base either defunct or open to the public for use in the tourism industry, much of the base is in a state of disrepair. One does not get the sense
of being in a place of military importance when visiting the site, only a feeling of degradation and decline.

But if the United States is keen to secure control of Asian shipping lanes, why is its once heavy presence on the Cape now little more than a memory? The answer is straightforward: A decrease in concern over the threat of global nuclear war, coupled with an increase in U.S. attention on Indo-Pacific sea-lanes dictating a more northerly military presence, and the diversification of Australia’s military capacity means military concerns in the area are shifting. Resulting from changing technologies, economies and political climates, it appears that the military importance of the Northwest Cape of Western Australia is now in a state of retraction. Still, it is likely that the region will not see a complete demilitarisation for some time yet. For one, the station remains a communication site for U.S. and Australian submarines, but more importantly the Northwest Cape’s geographic location will ensure that the region remains strategically important. Ultimately the Cape will remain only partially militarised, still active but less prominent than in previous years.

**Project Findings**

At its core, the photographic component of this project documents the key environments of the Northwest Cape of Western Australia from a bioregional perspective, focusing specifically on the Cape Range subregion. Through investigating the three main landscape types of the natural, the human inhabited and the ruined industrial, the project not only facilitates a more holistic insight into the relationships between each of these environmental components, but also offers an overview of the human impact on the region, and presents an alternative perspective to the deeply entrenched view of human
mastery over the environment. Given the limitations discussed earlier, the outcomes were largely successful, but these achievements were arrived at with some unexpected results.

The central aim of this project is to gather evidence supporting the assertion that more sustainable relationships between the people and the environments they interact with is increasingly necessary. Through depicting the interconnections between man-altered landscapes and the natural environment this project does that, but the photographs illustrate a bioregion where the traces of human activity (overt and subtle) form the dominant visual characteristic. Viewing the photographs taken during the four-week field trip as a single body of work, a strong pattern of human influence emerges, irrespective of the geographic isolation of some locations. Whether it is in the massive communication towers looming ominously over an otherwise untouched nature, the snaking bitumen roads slicing the environment in two, or the stark new housing estates popping up on the fringes of town, traces of human influence on the landscape are repeatedly illustrated both subtly and overtly. Landscapes devoid of modern human influence appear rarely and, given the isolation of the Cape Range sub-bioregion, realisation of the dominance of humanity is somewhat surprising. The evidence offered in these photographs speaks of a region impacted by modern humanity to a greater degree than expected, yet more importantly it illuminates the urgency of the need for a shift in how humans perceive the Earth, one that moves away from supremacy and mastery toward sustainability and mutuality.

However, what was immediately most striking about photographing in the Cape Range subregion was not the level of human impact but the level of difficulty involved in
achieving effective photographs. Encumbered by harsh, bright lighting conditions and monotonous, predominantly featureless terrain, photographic options are limited, and capturing conventionally appealing photographs under these conditions is difficult. Essentially, much of the Northwest Cape can be described as aesthetically ‘ugly’, at least in the traditional sense of landscape photography. A visual banality dominates much of the region, yet despite this uninspiring aesthetic useful photography is obviously still achievable. Rather than attempting to avoid the hurdles of banality and ugliness, it is better to recognise these visual aspects of the landscape as naturally occurring phenomena, and instead shift focus directly upon them.

Recognising that banality and ugliness are naturally occurring visual features of the Cape Range, and therefore worthy of documentation, was an important step toward attaining a level of photographic veracity within the project. In effect, much of the photography is free from the aesthetic boundaries encumbering the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful, allowing the project to hold true to a discipline of photographic documentary. Considering the central aim of offering a more realistic reflection of a region’s landscapes through photography, this is an important basis upon which the visual language of the work sits. While some are perhaps not visually pleasing in the conventional sense, the photographs strive for a fairer depiction of the region, and this approach may not always adhere to aesthetic appeal. Ultimately though, argument over the success (or failure) of the photographs should not be based on the level of visual pleasure espoused through the banal in the natural, the mundane in the man-altered, or the ugly in the ruined, and nor, for that matter, should they be judged by the application of the sublime or picturesque. Rather, the question of achievement
should revolve around the even-handedness of the photographs, irrespective of the aesthetic modes employed.

Unbound by the need to repeatedly adhere to a singular set of accepted aesthetic conventions, and motivated instead by a search for accuracy and veracity, documentation of a bioregion becomes an easier task. The photographs of the Harold E. Holt Communications Base are good examples of the benefits arising out of this shift in focus. Now controlled by a skeleton staff of private sector defence personnel, the base is no longer the bustling centre of Cold War military activity it once was, and as such the majority of buildings and facilities on the site are lie defunct. Yet because of its nuclear lineage and state of decline, the base offers a unique range of photographic opportunities that sit more easily within the banal or grotesque than they do anything related to beauty. The disused American diner, tenpin bowling alley, overgrown baseball pitch and curiously named Chapel of Peace and Freedom (figure 7) all offer a unique visual insight into the region’s heritage, a ruined military industrial wasteland, a by-product of the post war American way of life in the early stages of entropic decline. Once the sole reason for a concerted western presence in the area, as Exmouth emerges ever more confidently as the region’s tourism capital there is the sense now that the base will become a historical footnote. But to document the area with picturesque nostalgia would not do it justice the way embracing the base’s inherent banality does.

Exmouth too contains elements of the banal, but this is arguably not the most interesting visual aspect of the town. Although it is a growing mecca for tourists, Exmouth’s scale remains small, its layout comprising a central commercial/ municipal centre, a light industrial area on the outskirts and various residential areas roughly divided into two
distinct groups: the original, more centrally located U.S. military buildings; and the newly built housing estates comprising larger, more sophisticated housing. It is these new housing estates that offer possibly the most interesting showcase for isolated living. Built to endure cyclonic conditions, many of the new houses, with their corrugated iron roofing and outer walls, retain a utilitarian aesthetic reminiscent of earlier, simpler structures. But while the use of corrugated iron is a lightweight solution to problems of transporting heavy building resources from far away manufacturing centres, these materials conjure up a sense of sentimentality for traditional Australian outback dwellings, invoking images of the rusting corrugated iron roof of the outback pubs of yesteryear. The high spec angular designs applied to the contemporary buildings belie an architectural sophistication not instantly discernable, and serve to create an uncanny contrast against such harsh, arid conditions. This uncanniness is well illustrated in the aptly named photograph *New Build #1* (figure 8), complete with Astroturf front lawn, perfectly manicured plants, and new green rubbish bin, all of which seem oddly placed within the Cape’s ancient, scorched, red earth, the Australian bush a barely visible footnote in the distant background. While the house dominates the scene, pushing the bush back while civilisation presses forward, it also creates a jarring contrast, the perfect lines and perfect lawns out of place in such barren surroundings.

The uncanniness of the new housing estates is a contradiction to the older buildings of Exmouth. Consider, for example, the photograph of the older *Masonic Lodge* for example (figure 9). Situated more centrally, on the edge of the town’s industrial area, the lodge is a building harking back to original US military construction of the town, and suffers from far less architectural consideration. But with its garish outer finish, established trees and generally degraded appearance, the building seems more at home
within its surroundings than the newly built houses not far away. The masonic lodge is banal indeed, but it could not be called uncanny or grotesque.

Argument so far has centred on the project’s aesthetic exploitation of the banal, grotesque and uncanny. But both the communications base and the town also lend themselves to notions of the mundane at play within the New Topographics. As Tolonen suggests, New Topographics challenges “cultural conventions of landscape in terms of the preferred subject” (2012, p. 158), and as dilapidated throwbacks to mid 20th century North American hegemony, the features of the base and the town do just that. The mundane is easily discernable within the photographs, and should come as little surprise given the historical influence of the U.S. on the region. These areas of human inhabitation remain slices of a transplanted American suburbia constructed within a barren and alien environment, the same landscape that spawned a group of photographers to document the radically changed American environment in the 1970’s. It is impossible to ignore the influence of New Topographics on these photographs, and while photographs employing the sublime and picturesque scream their position to the audience, New Topographics judgements are subtle and reserved, inviting thoughtful reflection.

Depiction of the mundane should not suggest, however, an absence of the sublime or the picturesque in Northwest Cape. In the interest of fair reflection, if landscapes with the capacity to elicit the sublime exist in the region, they should be documented with as much consideration as any other. As mentioned in earlier sections, such landscapes do exist within the Cape Range National Park. While much of the ranges are difficult to navigate, three of the most spectacular sites are well known and relatively easy to
access. Shothole Canyon, Charles Knife Gorge and Yardie Creek are all examples of Australian nature spots personifying the common aesthetic notions of the sublime and picturesque. Rising up from the flat plains below, both ‘Shothole’ and ‘Charles Knife’ offer an indisputably spectacular view of the Gulf of Exmouth on the eastern shore of the peninsula, not to mention the sublime wonder of the canyons themselves. If not for the road itself, *Road into Shothole Canyon* (figure 10), for example, could be compared with an Ansel Adams photograph (figure 11), while the photograph *View From Inside Gorge, Yardie Creek* (figure 12) is reminiscent of the picturesque employed by North American frontier photographer Carlton Watkins (figure 13).

However, as mentioned by Giblett (2012, p. 100) sublimated sites of wilderness such as these, while indisputably stunning to behold, perpetuate an unsustainable and ultimately damaging expectation of wilderness as locations engendering emotions of awe in the beholder. Conversely, environments that do not elicit wonder, as with much of the rest of the Cape Range, tend to be considered lesser and, as a result, overlooked. As previously argued, focus on all settings requires address here in an attempt to offer an even-handed view of both the ‘greater’ and the ‘lesser’ landscapes. Charles Knife Gorge, Shothole Canyon and Yardie Creek unquestionably adhere to the aesthetics of the sublime and picturesque, but these are just three sites in a myriad of potential locations, and photographs depicting unknown and visually unpleasing bluffs and ranges portray the Cape Range in an arguably more accurate and more sustainable light.

Developing a visual language that conveys fairly the three key landscapes of the Cape Range bioregion has resulted in the application of multiple aesthetic approaches. At work in this body of photographs are at least five main modes of aesthetic
representation: the sublime; the picturesque; the mundane; the banal; the uncanny; and the grotesque. The sublime and the picturesque have been traditionally used to promote attitudes of mastery over the land to great effect, but these aesthetic conventions can also be incorporated into providing a new perspective for understanding Australia’s environments. But so can the mundane and the ugly, and any other aesthetic mode of representation for that matter. In fact, it is through the application of all of these aesthetic modes that a fairer depiction of the Cape Range bioregion has been achieved. While it can be convincingly argued that the results, when considered as a complete body of work, appear somewhat disjointed, lacking a visual continuity, it is my position that any aesthetic mode dominating a study of this type should do so only in line with the physical realities of the region itself. For the sake of fairly portraying geographically related photographs in support of fostering a more sustainable outlook toward the environment, any potential aesthetic modes of representation that present themselves should be exploited.

With the perspective of the series offering a message of sustainability, it is necessary to discuss the pattern of human presence, particularly in those photographs depicting something resembling pristine wilderness. Virtually all of the photographs of nature contain traces of modern human influence. From the arching lines of electrical cables across the sky, to ragged dirt tracks tearing through the bush, as wilderness gives way to civilisation the press of humanity is never far away. Whatever lines drawn on maps to differentiate between the human and natural worlds count for little on the ground. Lines dominate the human world, but there are no straight lines in nature, and therefore it is pertinent that the majority of human artifacts scattering the photographs of wilderness depict straight lines. The straight line of the road, the straight line of the communication
tower and the straight line of the power cable all connote man’s mastery over environment, as natural forces are overcome by human precision. The straight line signals the end of wilderness. The division between forces of nature and forces of human precision symbolised in the line also conjures an interesting binary between the masculine and feminine. Abrupt, masculine straight lines of civilisation a harbinger of destruction, while “Mother Earth’s supine body” (Maclean, cited in Giblett & Tolonen, 2012, p. 95) represented in the undulating ranges and curving Ningaloo coastline, connote a maternal benevolence. But the feminine succumbs easily to the brutish dominance of the masculine, and on the Northwest Cape the struggle between masculine humanity and feminine Mother Nature is an all too common demarcation.

There are some interesting contradictions to this idea of the masculine line and the feminine curve however. For instance, extant in the photograph *Bush Fire Near Giralia* (figure 14) is the straight horizon line, which dominates the line of the road in middle distance, while the aerial photograph *Yardie Creek Road 2* (figure 15) depicts the road in curvaceous mode. This blurring of the masculine and feminine conventions is akin to the blurring of the human and natural worlds.

The lines of humanity are no more clearly visible than in the project’s aerial photography. With respect to large-scale portrayal of environmental relationships, photographing at ground level has some inherent limitations. This perspective often fails to encompass the interacting factors of the environment, and while arguably useful for photographic documentation at a macro level (macro in relation to an area covering approximately 25,500 square kilometres), without more topographical coverage, the project’s aim of photographically depicting the physical and visual relationships...
between the different environments of the Cape Range region would not be comprehensively met. With its bird’s eye view, this is where aerial photography excels. Freed from the limitations of being bound to the earth, the camera records landscape with aesthetic abstraction, as Tolonen notes in discussing the aerial photography of Richard Woldendorp (2012, p. 176). However, the aerial perspective also provides insight into the interrelationships between the various factors at play within the environment. Without the distraction of their surroundings, roads are seen as dark lines, dividing the landscape into sections. Bush tracks too become mutated versions of dried creek beds, similar to natural shapes, but too straight to be natural. Buildings and vehicles, seen from afar, become geometric blocks of human influence. Even in such isolated parts of the world the viewer is confronted by the presence of the straight lines of masculine, modern, industrial humanity.

The main desire of this project is to present an accurate depiction of the Cape Range bioregion, and as such colour features predominantly here. But unlike the saturated, glossy tones of wilderness photography, colours are muted and the photographs finished in matte. Not only demarking a distinction between hyper-real wilderness photography, this approach to colour also captures the bleached, lonely, melancholic conditions of the Cape Range bioregion. Usually celebrated for its unique beauty, the common imagery chosen to represent this location is usually bright, colourful and awe inspiring. As discussed in previous chapters, the attention this aesthetic mode brings to the Cape Range has contributed to increased pressure on the environment through the growth of the tourism industry. Ultimately it is these factors, which lay at the core of the aim of the project itself, that are alluded to in the muted colours, matte finish and melancholic overtones of the photographs.
Figure 7. David Jo Bradley, *Chapel of Peace and Freedom*, Cape Range sub-bioregion, Northwest Australia,
Figure 8. David Jo Bradley, *New Build #1*, Cape Range sub-bioregion, Northwest Australia, 2012.

Figure 9. David Jo Bradley, *Masonic Lodge*, Cape Range sub-bioregion, Northwest Australia, 2012.
Figure 10. David Jo Bradley, *Road into shothole canyon*, Cape Range sub-bioregion, Northwest Australia, 2012.

Figure 11. Ansel Adams, *Canyon de Chelly, Arizona*, 1947.
Figure 12. David Jo Bradley, *View From Inside Gorge, Yardie Creek*, Cape Range sub-bioregion, Northwest Australia, 2012.

Figure 13. Carlton Watkins, *Washington Column, 2082 Feet, Yosemite*, California 1872.

Figure 15. David Jo Bradley, *Yardie Creek Road #2*, Cape Range sub-bioregion, Northwest Australia, 2012.
Conclusion

Today the relevance of aesthetic considerations in portraying landscapes seems somewhat of a moot point. Provided the messages implied within a chosen visual mode support a sustainable outlook toward the environment, from an ecological standpoint it should matter little which aesthetic approach is best. Given its traditional role as a tool for promoting empirical attitudes of mastery over the land which not only resonate in the contemporary western mindset, but which have also contributed greatly to the environmental predicament humanity now finds itself in, landscape photography has much to answer for. And although more recently landscape photography has been employed out of a desire do good, through promoting the protection and sanctification of pristine wilderness areas of beauty, the ignorance and/ or disregard for the political implications of preserving of only beautiful environments has once again contributed to the development of an unrealistic and ultimately unsustainable attitude toward the Earth. In the world of photography landscape photographers are at the forefront of the ecological push for change. And in recognising this, a realisation that the approach they have chosen is an entry into a politically sensitive, culturally influential realm of photographic representation must also come. A complete understanding of the crucial importance of this role is paramount, not only to the push for a change in the portrayal of landscape toward something more environmentally responsible, but ultimately in order to ensure a sustainable future for the Earth and all its living things.

This project proposes a new format for landscape photography, one that views landscapes from the perspective of bioregional geography. This approach is a depiction of plural landscapes as opposed to singular, and while it may seem that as a body of work these photographs do not always complement a singular, coherent visual language,
it should considered that the visual language of a bioregion is not coherent either. Ultimately, landscape photography is simply a subjective reflection of the Earth’s contours, and its language is the language of the photographer. The language of photography can never hold the answer to the environmental conundrum the Earth now faces, but what the camera captures can contribute to realigning the concepts that have helped justify, support and condone the destruction of Mother Earth at the hands of humanity.
References

Literature


Figures

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Figure 5.
Figure 6.

Figure 7.

Figure 8.
Bradley, D.J. (2012). *New Build #1, Cape Range Sub-Bioregion, Northwest Australia*. (Unpublished Photograph).

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

Figure 11.

Figure 12.
Bradley, D.J. (2012). *View From Inside Gorge, Yardie Creek, Cape Range Sub-Bioregion, Northwest Australia*. (Unpublished Photograph).

Figure 13.

Figure 14.

Figure 15
Bradley, D.J. (2012). *Yardie Creek Road #2, Cape Range Sub-Bioregion, Northwest Australia*. (Unpublished Photograph).
In Australia, as with much of the world, landscape photography has played a significant role in raising awareness of the human impact on the environment. For the most part this awareness considers the questions of conservation and preservation of the natural world. In this respect landscape photography commonly depicts the Earth in one of two ways: the damaging effects of humanity’s mastery over the environment; or the sublime wonder of nature. In effect, the messages raised by landscape photography arise out of a singular perspective of nature, or culture.

But to develop a more sustainable viewpoint of our relationships with the environment, photography needs to offer a more complete illustration of the Earth by embracing all landscapes. Essentially, this position is a call for a shift in focus to one that recognises the nature and the culture of the regions where people live, the natural and the man made, the developed and the undeveloped, the pristine and the ruined.

David Jo Bradley
Straight Lines

A Photographic Case Study of the Cape Range Bioregion of Northwest Australia

David Jo Bradley
This book is dedicated to Christian

Thanks to Rod Giblett, Max Pam and Juha Tolonen for their invaluable knowledge and guidance. Thanks to Mick for his generosity with his boats, Penny for her flying skills, and the Three Islands crew for the diving times. Special thanks to Christian and Ellece for their friendship, generosity and hospitality. Thanks also to my family for their support, and to my beautiful fiancée Sian, I thank you for everything you’ve given.
Straight Lines
A Photographic Case Study of the Cape Range Bioregion of Northwest Australia
The CAR1 Carnarvon sub-bioregion is comprised of alluvial, aeolian and marine sediments over cretaceous strata, with a mosaic of saline plains covered by samphire and saltbush shrublands, woodland on sandy ridges and plains, scrub vegetation on clay flats, and tree to shrub steppe over grasslands on and between fields of red sand dunes. There is also the presence of limestone strata with shrubland outcrops to the north, where extensive tidal flats in sheltered bays support mangroves.

The dunefields of the Cape Range and Giralia form the northern part of the Carnarvon Basin. This includes rugged limestone ranges and extensive areas of red dunefield, white coastal dunes and mud flats. Acacia shrublands grow on limestone and red dunefields, while grasslands and sparse Eucalyptus trees and shrubs exist across the ranges. Extensive hummock grasslands also grow on the Cape Range and eastern dunefields, and tidal mudflats along sheltered bays of Exmouth Gulf support extensive mangroves. Beach dunes support extensive colonies of spinifex, while further saline plains containing low shrublands exist along the eastern hinterland of the Exmouth Gulf. The Muiron, Barrow, Lowendal and Montebello groups of islands exist on limestone strata. The climate across the sub-bioregion ranges from arid, through to semi-desert and sub-tropical, with a wide variation between summer and winter rainfall. Wet season cyclone activity can be significant, affecting the coast and hinterland on an annual basis. CAR1 Carnarvon sub-bioregion covers an area of 2,547,911 hectares.

(Kendrick & Mau, 2002, p. 69)
Chapel of Peace and Freedom, Harold E. Holt Communications Base

Whale Shark Trailer, Central Exmouth
Joy Flights, Cape Range, Western Side

Dead Cow, Minilya-Exmouth Road
Dirt Road, Cape Range, Western Side

Yardie Creek Road #1, Cape Range, Eastern Side
Dirt Road, Charles Knife Gorge, Cape Range, Eastern Side

Yardie Creek Road #2, Cape Range, Eastern Side
Since European exploration and settlement, the region has been subject to varied uses including pastoral, oil exploration, military operations and numerous maritime industries.

The Ningaloo Reef was added to the UNESCO World Heritage list in June 2011. While a positive step forward for the natural environment, there are currently no sites within Cape Range National Park listed on Western Australia’s Register of Heritage Places for anthropological heritage values. Despite this, there are numerous remnants of European settlement, such as fences and wells, throughout the park, the historic significance of which has not yet been documented. Establishment and maintenance of these sites and artefacts of potential historical significance would be beneficial in reducing accidental loss or damage, and would assist future assessment of cultural heritage values. Should artefacts or locations of historic cultural significance be identified in the Range, management of these will be subject to the requirements of Western Australia’s Heritage of Western Australia Act.

Furthermore, historic shipwrecks lie on reefs offshore Cape Range National Park. Any pre-1900 shipwreck, including survivor’s and salvager’s camps found above the highwater mark is protected by the State Maritime Archaeology Act. By law, anybody who discovers shipwreck material must report their findings to the Director of the Western Australian Museum in Perth.

(Cape Range National Park Management Plan, 2010, p. 53)
Road into Shothole Canyon, Cape Range, Eastern Side

Seasonal Runoff, Cape Range, Western Side
Cul de Sac, Suburban Exmouth

Pole in Rock, Yardie Creek
Areas of the Northwest’s landmass have been dated at older than the Cainozoic period, some 60 million years ago. This age is at odds with conventional understanding of land evolution, which asserts no exposed surface should survive beyond the Oligocene period, 30 million years ago. Geologically, Western Australia is therefore one of the oldest places on Earth.

Northwest WA’s landscape has also endured extreme erosion, a clearly visible fact considering its flatness. Sediment deposited over WA’s landscape eroded away over time, re-exposing ancient surfaces which were then subjected to further erosion. The result was an intensified aging process unlike any other continent’s, which are typically rejuvenated several times through volcanic and seismic activity. The advanced state of erosion in WA explains much for the rich mineral deposits lying just below the surface.

Northwestern Australia has remained volcanically dormant for millions of years. This lack of volcanic activity has resulted in vast tracts of infertile soil. In addition, large areas of land spent millions of years under shallow seas that repeatedly receded and evaporated, leaving behind extensive salt deposits that, when brought to the surface through human clearing of native vegetation, severely inhibit plant growth. These factors contributed to a severely depleted soil condition which, together with the region’s erratic climate and geographic isolation, created a unique environment, both geologically, and in floral and faunal terms.

(Monroe, 2011)
New Build #1, Suburban Exmouth

Water Tower, Harold E. Holt Communications Base
Land Clearing, Industrial Exmouth

Communications Tower #2, Harold E. Holt Communications Base
Bush Fire, Near Giralia Homestead

Powerline Over Marshland, Cape Range, Eastern Side
Coral Reef Viewing, Bundegi Beach, Eastern Side

New Estate Carpark, Suburban Exmouth
The Northwest Cape was home to three groups of indigenous people: the Jinigudira, a coastal dwelling tribe, who regularly ventured out to sea on rafts of sticks; the Baiyungu Aborigines who inhabited areas farther south; and the Thalanyj, who inhabited inland areas to the east. Following European settlement of the region, many of these local people were taken from their homelands and forced to work in the surrounding pearling and pastoral industries.

Significant archaeological findings of cone shell beads from inside the Range extends the earliest known date of human use of decorative ornaments in Australia to a time comparable to the oldest such evidence in Europe. This suggests that behavioural patterns usually linked with modern human populations were occurring at the same time in the Southern Hemisphere.

Indigenous cultural history of the area has not been well documented, but this should not suggest such knowledge is unknown to local Aborigines. It does suggest, however, this information has been withheld from broader distribution.

The North West Cape is culturally important to the Gnulli Native Title Claimants Group. In English, “Gnulli” translates to “all of us” and the group, consisting of members from several Indigenous tribal groups, is recognised by the wider Aboriginal community as the custodial body for the North West Cape’s Aboriginal culture.

(Cape Range National Park Management Plan, 2010, p. 51)
Abandoned Concrete Pad, Cape Range, Eastern Side

Concrete Walling, Industrial Exmouth
Under Offer, Suburban Exmouth

Masonic Lodge, Suburban Exmouth
View from Inside Gorge, Yardie Creek

Drum with Bullet Holes, Cape Range, Eastern Side
Northwest Coast Highway

View of Ningaloo Reef Coastline, Western Side
CAR1 has one national park, one marine park, two conservation parks, one large island nature reserve, and four small island nature reserves. Cape Range National Park has one ranger, as does Ningaloo Reef, while other areas have none. In contrast, Barrow Island has an oilfield workforce of 200 - 400, Lowendal an oilfield workforce of 30-50, and the Montebellos have a pearl farming operation of 5-30 workers.

Various constraints impede protection of CAR1, particularly in respect to the unique and irreplaceable karst systems of Cape Range, and the UNESCO World Heritage listed Ningaloo Reef. Economic constraints on protecting fragile areas include costs of land acquisition and costs involved with implementing further management. To counteract bad management and ensure high conservation values, the acquisition of pastoral leases is advised. Constraints also exist with competing land use, particularly from oil and limestone mining interests and farming. Inappropriate recreational developments such as marina resorts also pose a significant threat.

The Canarvon bioregion is currently set at reservation Class 3, with only 3.45% of the region in conservation reserves. At the subregional level, CAR1 has just 2.2% of its landmass in conservation reserve. The current reserve system is highly biased in terms of criteria, and is not comprehensive or adequately representative of CAR1’s ecosystems. As a result, scientific advice suggests reclassification to reservation Class 2, with the possibility of further reclassification to an even higher primary classification if deemed appropriate at a later stage.

(Kendrick & Mau, 2002, p. 76)
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