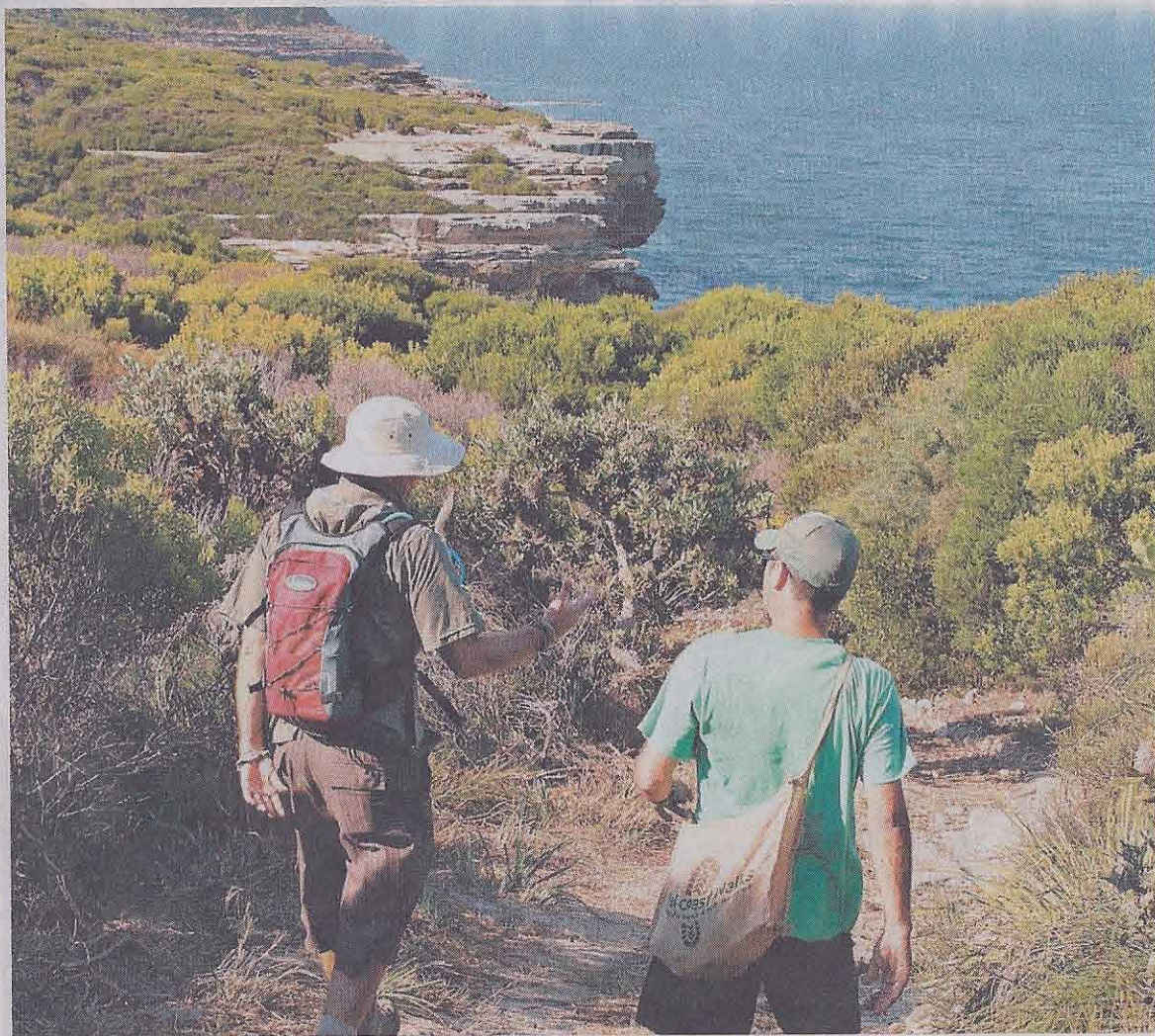


Getaway Royal National Park



PEACEFUL HAVEN: Ian Wells of Royal Coast Walks with a client on the Coast Track at Royal National Park.

Lose city blues in idyllic spot

Kara Murphy experiences a kingdom of adventures in Australia's oldest national park

I'VE just survived a harrowing encounter with a wobbegong.

Just kidding... sort of (everyone in my group – self included – survived). But the “encounter”, which merely involved paddling alongside a metre-long carpet shark near the banks of the Hacking River, within 16,300ha Royal National Park, was hardly harrowing. All humans present were seated inside kayaks, refraining from poking or otherwise touching the wobbie with hands or paddles. In fact, we all feel fortunate to have come across this bottom-dwelling shark, especially since Bruce Sigal, our tour guide and co-owner (with wife, Marnie) of Bundeena Kayaks, says he's never seen one in this area before.

Other highlights on this three-hour

kayak tour include paddling close to shore along the river's South West Arm, observing the park's funky eroded shapes of creamy Hawkesbury sandstone, looking for birds (241 species have been sighted here), dipping a Byron Bay biscuit into a fresh cup of coffee at Costens Point, and the sheer joy of being in the place I've wistfully spotted more than once from a Sydney-bound economy class seat: Australia's oldest national park, the second oldest (next to Wyoming's Yellowstone) national park in the world.

Former NSW premier Sir John Robertson (1816-1891) recognised the need for a park where Sydneysiders could escape the pressures of urban living. The park, traditional country of the Dharawal people, was gazetted in 1879 as The National Park and renamed Royal National Park in 1955 following the Queen's visit to Australia. It's still a fantastic place to lose your city blues, royal or otherwise.

Following the on-water experience, I hoof it from the Bonnie Vale picnic area, on the outskirts of Bundeena, to Passionfruit Cafe, where Royal Coast Walks' guide Ian Wells is waiting. Ian, originally from Sutherland Shire, has travelled, worked and trekked around the world, and is delighted to once again call the shire home.