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# Premier Colin Barnett confident of wild west's peak attractions

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If Colin Barnett hadn't opened up the park, 'the Chinese wouldn't come': Rick Besso on East Mount Barren with sons Warwick, left, and Aaron. Picture: Colin Murty

**From the craggy peak of East Mount Barren, Rick Besso and his sons can see to the horizon but not the edge of their “backyard”, the wild, 300,000ha Fitzgerald River National Park on the remote south coast of Western Australia.**

Unlocking this park is part of West Australian Premier Colin Barnett's pitch to the rest of the nation to go west for a holiday.

Mr Barnett intends to boost the value of the state's tourism sector by 30 per cent in four years, from \$8.9 billion to \$12bn a year, by also marketing Western Australia's pristine wilderness areas to countries that know it best as a mining state. This week, the Premier told *The Weekend Australian* his state would increasingly look to China, its biggest iron ore customer, for tourism dollars.

In a cabinet reshuffle on Monday a year before the state election, Mr Barnett gave up the state development portfolio he has held since 2008 and made himself Tourism Minister. “I'm taking over tourism because the growth on the resources side of the economy has been really dramatic but we are not going to see that again,” he said. “While the resource industry is huge, I'm turning my attention as Premier to where the new sources of growth will be.”

He said it was crucial to make it easier to visit extraordinary places such as Fitzgerald River National Park, which he described as “just stunning, a wonderland”.

Until a few years ago, the park was used mostly only by dirt-bike enthusiasts and fishermen. It now has bitumen roads, walk trails and camping facilities. The Barnett government and Rudd government agreed to jointly fund the upgrades, which cost \$40 million, after BHP Billiton closed its nickel project in Ravensthorpe, 50km from the northern boundary of the park, in 2009. The region was hit hard by the 1800 job losses and there was hope that park visitors would spend money in surrounding towns.

Mr Besso is a builder, caravan park and bistro owner, part-time farmer and now tour operator in the coastal community on the eastern edge of the park, Hopetoun, 600km southeast of Perth.

In the past 14 months, he has enticed 400 Chinese visitors to make the six-hour drive down to see the park's natural wonders. Most of his Chinese guests had already been to New York or London, and were thrilled to be surrounded by nature.

He takes them sandboarding, they sit around a campfire, spotlight kangaroos with cameras, and walk in one of the world's 35 listed botanical hot spots. “When the Chinese run up and down the dunes, getting sand in their hair and toes, they love it,” he says.

Mr Besso said Mr Barnett's decision to turn his attention to tourism was great news for his town. “Colin loves Fitzgerald River National Park — this place is his baby,” he says. “If he hadn't (opened up the park), the Chinese wouldn't come because they're not interested in driving long distances on a gravel track.”

Hiking up East Mount Barren with sons Aaron, 27, and Warwick, 23, Mr Besso notes the magic road that has allowed park visitor numbers to rise from 35,000 to 75,000 last year. He was among many locals who put money and faith into the boom everyone expected from the nickel project. Now he has refocused on the tourism potential of a park revered by scientists the world over for its biodiversity but not well known or understood more widely.

It is home to an astonishing array of native wildlife, including Western Australia's unique honey possums that emerge at dusk to drink nectar in groves of pale yellow banksia flowers. The park boasts spectacular wildflowers and 1800 plant species, far more than all of Britain, and 20 per cent of the state's known plants.

*Additional reporting: Paige Taylor*