



Shark Bay, Western Australia

Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1991

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SHARK BAY IS LOCATED ON THE MOST WESTERN POINT OF THE COAST OF AUSTRALIA AND COVERS AN AREA OF 2.3 MILLION HECTARES. THE REGION IS ONE OF THE FEW PROPERTIES INSCRIBED ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST FOR ALL FOUR OUTSTANDING NATURAL UNIVERSAL VALUES:

- as an outstanding example representing the major stages in the earth's evolutionary history;
- as an outstanding example representing significant ongoing geological and biological processes;
- as an example of superlative natural phenomena; and
- containing important and significant habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity.

The Shark Bay region represents a meeting point of three major climatic regions and forms a transition zone between two major botanical provinces—the South West and Eremaean provinces.

The number of species that reach the end of their range is a major feature of the region's flora. Twenty-five per cent of vascular plants (283 species) are at the limits of their range in Shark Bay. Many vegetation formations and plant species are found only in the interzone area.



Banded hare-wallaby. (AHC collection)

A spectacular contrast between desert sands and aquamarine seas.

(AHC collection)



The area south of Freycinet Estuary contains the unique type of vegetation known as tree heath. There are also at least 51 species endemic to the region and others that are considered new to science.

The Shark Bay region is an area of major zoological importance, primarily due to habitats on peninsulas and islands being isolated from the disturbance that has occurred elsewhere. Of the 26 species of endangered Australian mammals, five are found on Bernier and Dorre Islands. These are the boodie or burrowing bettong, rufous hare-wallaby, banded hare-wallaby, the Shark Bay mouse and the western barred bandicoot.

The Shark Bay region has a rich avifauna with over 230 species, or 35 per cent, of Australia's bird species having been recorded. A number of birds attain their northern limit here, such as the regent parrot, western yellow robin, blue-breasted fairy wren and striated pardalote.

The region is also noted for the diversity of its amphibians and reptiles, supporting nearly 100 species. Again, many species are at the northern or southern limit of their range. The area is also significant for the variety of burrowing species, such as the sandhill frog, which, apparently, needs no surface water. Shark Bay contains three endemic

Previous page: Stromatolites, Hamelin Pool. (L. Capill, AHC collection)

Inset: Coquina shells are an unusual feature of the beaches of L'haridon Bight. (M. Brouwer, AHC collection)

sand swimming skinks, and 10 of the 30 dragon lizard species found in Australia.

The 12 species of seagrass in Shark Bay make it one of the most diverse seagrass assemblages in the world. Seagrass covers over 4 000 square kilometres of the bay, with the 1 030 square kilometre Wooramel Seagrass Bank being the largest structure of its type in the world.

Seagrass has contributed significantly to the evolution of Shark Bay as it has modified the physical, chemical and biological environment as well as the geology and has led to the development of major marine features, such as Faure Sill.

The barrier banks associated with the growth of seagrass over the last 5 000 years has, with low rainfall, high evaporation and low tidal flushing, produced the hypersaline Hamelin Pool and L'haridon Bight. This hypersaline condition is conducive to the growth of cyanobacteria which trap and bind sediment to produce a variety of mats and structures including stromatolites.

Stromatolites represent the oldest form of life on earth. They are representative of life-forms some 3 500 million years ago. Hamelin Pool contains the most diverse and abundant examples of stromatolite forms in the world.

Shark Bay is renowned for its marine fauna. The population of about 10 000 dugong, for example, is one of the largest in the world, and dolphins abound, particularly at Monkey Mia.

Humpback whales use the Bay as a staging post in their migration along the coast. This species was reduced by past exploitation from an estimated population of 20 000 on the west coast to 500–800 whales in 1962; the population is now estimated at 2 000–3 000.



Spectacular wildflower displays can be found around Shark Bay during late winter and spring. (AHC collection)

Green and loggerhead turtles are found in Shark Bay near their southern limits, nesting on the beaches of Dirk Hartog Island and Peron Peninsula. Dirk Hartog Island is the most important nesting site for loggerhead turtles in Western Australia.

Shark Bay is also an important nursery ground for larval stages of crustaceans, fishes and medusae.

The Western Australian Government is responsible for day-to-day management of the Shark Bay World Heritage Area.



Further Reading

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Department of Conservation and Land Management, 1989, *Shark Bay*.

Trugden, M. 1995, *Flora of Shark Bay World Heritage Area and its Environs*, Department of Conservation and Land Management, Como, WA.

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World Heritage — What Does it Mean?



HERITAGE IS OUR LEGACY FROM THE PAST,
WHAT WE LIVE WITH TODAY, AND WHAT
WE PASS ON TO FUTURE GENERATIONS.

What makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage sites are important to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory in which they are located.

It is the universal quality of world heritage sites, transcending national identities that makes, for example, a World Heritage site in Egypt important to the peoples of Indonesia, Argentina or Australia as well as to Egyptians.

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

This universal quality is expressed in the *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (the World Heritage Convention). While respecting the sovereignty of individual nations it recognises that people in all nations have an interest in protecting those heritage places that are so outstanding they are important to all people. Countries who sign the Convention agree to work together to identify and protect those outstanding natural and cultural heritage places in their countries. The Convention also ensures that technical and financial resources are available to maintain World Heritage sites

Without this support some sites with recognised cultural or natural value would deteriorate or, worse, disappear.

By November 1999, 159 countries had signed the Convention and 582 properties had been included on the World Heritage List. Australia was one of the first countries to ratify the Convention, becoming a State Party to the Convention in 1974. Since then Australia has nominated and had

accepted thirteen World Heritage sites that contain natural and cultural heritage of international significance. Australia is recognised internationally as a leader in identifying, protecting and maintaining World Heritage sites for the benefit of present and future generations.

How does a World Heritage site differ from a site of national heritage? The key lies in the words 'outstanding universal value'.

All countries have sites of local or national heritage significance that are, understandably, a source of national pride. It is important for all countries to identify and protect their natural and cultural heritage and if a site is agreed by the World Heritage Committee to have outstanding universal value it is placed on the World Heritage List.

Sites selected for World Heritage listing must, on a global scale, represent the best example of cultural and natural heritage.

The World Heritage List includes places many would recognise instantly, as well as less well known places that many may be surprised to find on the list. The List includes places such as: the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras; Old Town of Ghadamès, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya; Auschwitz Concentration Camp, Poland; Yosemite National Park, United States; the Taj Mahal, India; Kluane National Park, Canada; and, Paris, Banks of the Seine, France.

Much of the information contained in this leaflet has been provided by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which provides the secretariat for the World Heritage Committee. Detailed information about the World Heritage Convention and all the World Heritage Properties can be obtained from their website at www.unesco.org/whc

Australia's World Heritage Properties



There are currently (November 1999) thirteen Australian properties on the World Heritage List. They are: the Great Barrier Reef; Kakadu National Park; the Willandra Lakes Region; the Lord Howe Island Group; the Tasmanian Wilderness; Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park; the Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves (Australia); the Wet Tropics of Queensland; Shark Bay, Western Australia; Fraser Island; the Australian Fossil Mammal Sites (Riversleigh/Naracoorte), Macquarie Island, and Heard and McDonald Islands.

The Great Barrier Reef, the Tasmanian Wilderness, the Wet Tropics of Queensland and Shark Bay meet all four World Heritage criteria for natural heritage,

with Kakadu National Park, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, Willandra Lakes and the Tasmanian Wilderness being listed for both natural and cultural criteria. These Australian sites are among the very few properties on the World Heritage List selected for both natural and cultural criteria, or for all natural criteria.

This leaflet contains some information about Australia's World Heritage Properties and more detailed information can be obtained from our website at www.environment.gov.au/heritage/whu/auswha.html or by contacting the manager of each World Heritage property.

