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Shark Bay World Heritage Notes



ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION DISTRICT OFFICE, DENHAM, WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ZUYTDORP WRECK

The wreck of the Dutch ship *Zuytdorp* lies on the seabed against the cliff face at the southern extremity of the Shark Bay World Heritage Area. *Zuytdorp* was wrecked in winter 1712 whilst on a voyage from Holland to Batavia in the East Indies (now Jakarta in Indonesia). Aboard the *Zuytdorp* were more than 250 passengers and crew and a cargo of trade goods and silver including 248,000 guilders in newly minted coins.

The spices and other trade goods of the East Indies attracted European and American merchants. The initial route to the Indies was north-east from the Cape of Good Hope. In 1611, seafarers found that by heading east from the Cape, they were driven by strong westerly winds which made for a faster voyage and resulted in fewer deaths on board. The problem with this new route lay in deciding when to alter course to head north and as a result many East Indies bound vessels found themselves in difficulties along the shores of Western Australia.

The wreck of the *Zuytdorp* was discovered in 1927 by station workers who were fencing and trapping dingoes on the remote cliffs between Tamala and Murchison House Stations. One of the station workers was the late Tom Pepper Senior. In 1954, a geologist exploring for petroleum, Phillip Playford, met Pepper and after examining artefacts found at the site, returned to Perth and identified from the coins that the wreck was the *Zuytdorp*.

The clues to this shipwreck mystery and the fate of the crew lie in the artefacts from the seabed and nearby shore. It is considered likely that the *Zuytdorp* struck reef virtually without warning, probably at night, as the anchors were stowed away. The wreck came to rest close enough to the coastal reef platform for some passengers and crew to bridge the gap to apparent safety. It is likely that there were few survivors.

Archaeological evidence shows that survivors lit huge fires in the hope of attracting salvation from passing vessels or searching ships. Their hopes were in vain. They were likely to have stayed near the wreck for as long as possible because Dutch Captains of this era were commanded to sight the coast at 27 degrees south, which is almost the exact latitude of the wreck.

Coins and other artifacts found at water soaks some distance inland led to speculation that some survivors may have joined an Aboriginal group. Water is scarce in the area other than in winter, so without the help of local Aborigines the Dutch survivors would probably have died with the onset of the hot summer. Researchers are currently investigating the possibility of a genetic link between *Zuytdorp* survivors and local Aborigines.

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In 1992, 59,000 hectares of land surrounding the wreck was declared the Zuytdorp Nature Reserve. The Reserve includes the majority of the permanent and seasonal soaks that the stranded Dutch would have had to rely on to survive. In addition to its cultural importance, Zuytdorp Nature Reserve has a high diversity of plant species representing a transition zone between two major botanical provinces. These floristic communities are one of the nominated World Heritage values of Shark Bay. Access to the Zuytdorp Nature Reserve and wrecksite is both hazardous and restricted. For safety reasons at least two vehicles are required for expeditions to the area.

Permission is required by the Department of Environment and Conservation to undertake an expedition into the Nature Reserve. Access to the Nature Reserve is via private tracks so the Agricultural Protection Board and managers of adjoining stations must also be contacted for permission to enter their properties.

The immediate area surrounding the wreck and associated land sites is a protected zone. Permission is required from the WA Maritime Museum to enter this area. Diving on the wreck is prohibited for safety reasons and to protect historic relics.