



## Rowley Shoals Marine Park

The Rowley Shoals is a chain of coral atolls on the edge of one of the widest continental shelves in the world.

**Above** A magnificent sea anemone (*Heteractis magnifica*).  
Photo – Glen Cowans

*Opposite page*

**Above background** The biodiversity of soft corals was studied at the Rowley Shoals for the first time in 2007 and the results will assist future research into soft corals in north-west Western Australia.

**Bottom right** A researcher identifying soft corals at the Rowley Shoals.  
Photos – Eric Matson/AIMS

Clerke and Imperieuse reefs form the Rowley Shoals Marine Park, declared in 1990 and extended four-fold in 2004. It is managed by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). The nearby Mermaid Reef Marine National Nature Reserve (encompassing the northern-most reef) is managed by the Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts with the assistance of DEC. Custom's Border Protection and the Western Australian Department of Fisheries also help manage the shoals by patrolling the waters for illegal fishing activity or other commercial activities, and monitoring any environmental disturbances.

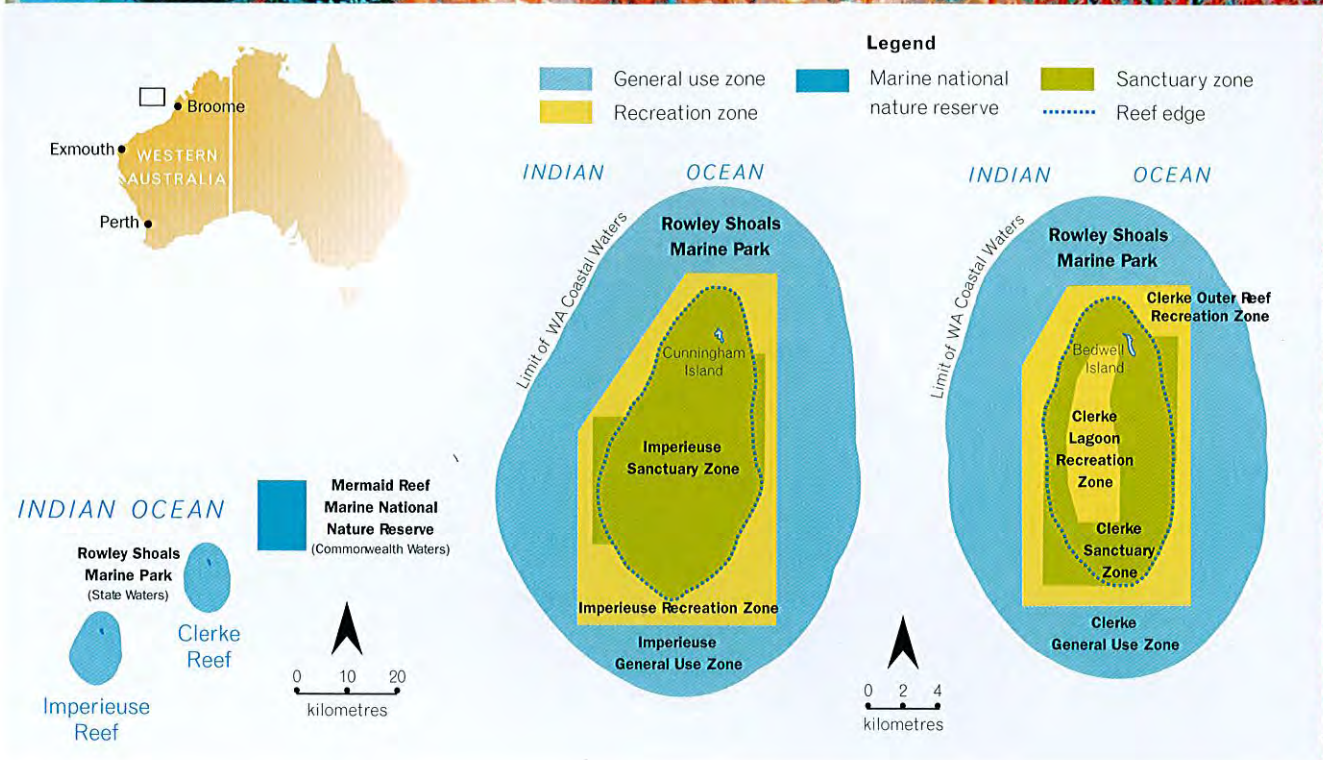
The three atolls have shallow lagoons inhabited by corals and abundant marine life. Each atoll covers an area of about 80 to 90 square kilometres. The three shoals are strikingly similar in dimension, shape, orientation and distance apart. Each atoll is north-south orientated, pear-shaped, with the narrow end towards the north. The

shoals rise with nearly vertical sides from deep water. Mermaid Reef, the most northerly, rises from about 440 metres, Clerke from 390 metres and Imperieuse from about 230 metres.

From about 1977, charter boats based from Broome began operating deep sea fishing and diving expeditions to the area. Since then, interest has expanded enormously and the Rowley Shoals has gained a well-deserved reputation as offering some of the best diving in Australia. Today, the shoals rank among the most remote and pristine marine areas in the world. Lying on the very edge of Australia's continental shelf, they are regarded as the most perfect examples of shelf atolls in Australian waters.

### Marine wildlife

The coral atolls of the Rowley Shoals are famed for their almost untouched coral gardens, giant clams and other shellfish. Giant potato cod and Maori wrasse sometimes follow divers around, while colourful reef fish show little fear, and trevally, mackerel and



tuna hover in schools. An exceptional 233 species of coral and 688 species of fish inhabit the shoals, including many species not found on near-shore coral reefs. As well as being inhabited by a number of species found nowhere else, the coral and fish communities of the Rowley Shoals are unique in their composition, and in the relative abundance of species. The marine communities of the Rowley Shoals are more characteristic of south-east Asia than any other Western Australian reefs.

The outside walls of the shoals are alive with soft corals in every imaginable colour. At low tide the water becomes dammed within the reef walls, the water gushing over them like waterfalls. At high tide, the reefs disappear beneath the sea, with only the sandy islands of Cunningham and Bedwell visible.

Bedwell Island, in Clerke Reef, is home to one of only two colonies of red-tailed tropicbirds in Western Australia. The sandy cay is used for nesting by the tropicbirds and other sea birds such as wedge-tailed shearwaters, white-bellied sea-eagles, ruddy turnstone, various terns, sandy plovers, eastern reef-egrets and even a pair of white-tailed tropicbirds.

### Wreck of the *Lively*

In the early 1980s, a Broome charter boat operator advised the Western Australian Maritime Museum that he had seen man-made objects lying on top of the Mermaid atoll in the Rowley Shoals at low tide. Maritime archaeologists found two anchors, three-and-a-half metres long, lying together on the reef top. Their shape showed they had been made in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Iron knees which once fastened the deck to the walls of a wooden sailing ship were seen nearby.

More pieces of wreckage were strewn around a nearby underwater gully. They included two whalers trypots, once used for boiling down whale blubber to produce whale oil; five iron cannon; and a third anchor, among other artefacts. The wreck is believed to be of a 240-tonne ship known as the *Lively*, which was armed with 10 cannons, fastened with iron bolts and sheathed with copper when it embarked on a whaling voyage to the southern hemisphere around 1808-09.

### park facts

**Where is it?** About 260 kilometres (170 nautical miles) west-north-west offshore from Broome. The boat trip to the Rowley Shoals takes approximately 12 hours.

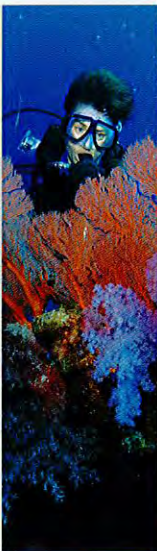
**Total area** The Rowley Shoals Marine Park was extended to cover 87,500 hectares in December 2004.

**What to do** Diving, snorkelling and swimming are popular activities. You can fish outside sanctuary zones at Clerke and Imperieuse reefs, although several fish species and all shellfish (check first with the Department of Fisheries) are fully protected. Fishing is not permitted in Mermaid Reef Marine National Nature Reserve. Public moorings are available outside Clerke and Imperieuse reefs and inside Clerke Reef lagoon but you must book via DEC's Broome office (see below).

**Must-see sites** The giant potato cods that inhabit the lagoons.

**Naming** The Rowley Shoals were named in 1818 by Captain Phillip Parker King. He discovered and named the most north-easterly of the trio, Mermaid Reef, after his ship. He gave the middle shoal the name Clerke Reef after Captain Clerke, who had reported it from a whaler sometime between 1800 and 1809. The south-western shoal was dubbed Imperieuse Reef after the vessel from which it was sighted by Captain Rowley in 1800.

**Nearest DEC office** West Kimberley District office, Broome, phone (08) 9195 5500.



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