




Turning back time on *Dirk Hartog Island*

An ambitious plan for Dirk Hartog Island National Park – *Return to 1616* – aims to restore the island to its former state. A small but important step towards achieving this vision brought together a team of people from a number of organisations and all walks of life to clean up this historic island.

Photos and story by Janine Guenther





On 25 October 1616, a Dutchman stepped ashore on an island just off the Western Australian coast, and there is every reason to believe that he was neither very content with his situation nor very impressed by what he saw. His name was Dirk Hartog and he was the captain of the Dutch East India Company ship *Eendracht*. On his way from Holland to Batavia (now Jakarta), he had been following a new sailing route, which involved a long westward passage across the Indian Ocean before turning north at an almost 90-degree angle, just before the west coast of what is now known as Australia. In those days, however, it was difficult to determine longitude accurately and, consequently, Hartog missed the turn to the north and landed on a then-unknown continent. It was a strange and inhospitable-looking country – flat, barren and seemingly uninhabitable. There were no shady trees to offer protection from the scorching sun, no streams or lakes to replenish the freshwater supplies and no familiar animals to hunt for food. With no apparent reason to stay longer than necessary, Hartog set sail for the East Indies (now Indonesia) on the third day. His unspectacular landfall would have probably been unknown if Hartog had not rammed a wooden post into a natural cleft high up on a cliff. Onto this post he nailed a pewter plate with an inscription recording his landing. Many years later the pewter plate made history, as the first physical record of European landing in Australia, and the island, the captain of the *Eendracht* accidentally discovered, became known as Dirk Hartog Island.

THE ISLAND

Covering 630km², Dirk Hartog Island is WA's largest island and lies within the Shark Bay World Heritage area. It was used for pastoral purposes from the

1860s until 2009, when the majority of the island was acquired by the Western Australian Government, to be managed as a national park by the then Department of Environment and Conservation (now Parks and Wildlife).

Apart from its intriguing history, the island is best known for its spectacular coastal scenery. While the eastern side is characterised by hauntingly beautiful bays lined with snow-white beaches, the western side is dominated by rugged cliffs, up to 200m high, which drop vertically down into the ocean. Covered by a green carpet of spinifex grassland, chenopod shrubland and patches of open heath, the island is an important refuge for some rare and threatened species such as the western spiny-tailed skink (*Egernia stokesii badia*) and the endangered loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*), which nests on the beaches. Notable members of bird fauna are an endemic subspecies of the southern emu-wren (*Stipiturus malachurus hartogi*) and the white-winged fairy-wren (*Malurus leucopterus leucopterus*) that occurs on the island in a black and white colour form.

Despite the island's role in the survival of some species, it became a death trap for others – especially for native mammals. Pressure from pastoralism, along with the introduction of weeds and animals such as goats and cats, have reduced the number of mammal species dramatically. Only three of 13 species that once inhabited the island have survived: the ash-grey mouse (*Pseudomys albocinereus*), the long-tailed dunnart (*Sminthopsis longicaudata*) and the sandy inland mouse (*Pseudomys hermannsburgensis*).

THE AIM

Almost to the day, 397 years after Dirk Hartog's landfall, a small group of Parks and Wildlife staff and volunteers stepped ashore on Dirk Hartog Island,

Left An osprey nest with the clean-up team's camp in the background.
Inset Digging up a fishing net at Turtle Bay.



Above A loggerhead turtle digging among tracks.

Left At the foot of Cape Inscription.

Below left A messy job: cleaning out the tank that had been misused as a rubbish tip.



● Dirk Hartog Island National Park

not far from the spot where the *Eendracht* once anchored. The group had been ferried across from Denham to the north-eastern end of the island where they touched land at Withnell Point – a small headland embracing the southern side of a picturesque bay. Thanks to the bay’s dazzling white beach and the entrancing turquoise colour of its sheltered waters, the group was instantly captivated by the island’s beauty.

However, during a walk along the beach, it soon became apparent that the bay wasn’t as pristine as it had first appeared. The beach, as well as the birrida (salt pan) beyond, was littered with cans, broken glass, ropes, pieces of plastic, wrapping material, foam buoys and other debris which immediately reminded the

group of its aim for the three-day trip: to clean up Dirk Hartog Island.

THE TEAM

On the island the group, including six Shark Bay residents along with Parks and Wildlife staff and volunteers, was welcomed by others already on the island, including marine park coordinator David Holley who was in charge of the project. Also part of the team were five members of the Perth Toyota Landcruiser 4WD Club, who devoted their time and vehicles, which apart from one Parks and Wildlife ‘troopy’ provided the only means of transport for the project. The five had arrived two days earlier and had already started collecting rubbish around Withnell Point. Equally crucial for the success of

the project, and a happy and motivated team, was cook Pam Dickenson, who had left her caretaker position at Steep Point to cook up some sumptuous meals in her makeshift kitchen on the beach. A total of 23 people from all walks of life joined forces to clean up the island and do their bit to help restore the island’s ecosystems.

THE PROJECT

The clean-up project focused on several sites in the northern part of the island. The first day was dedicated to the area at Withnell Point where rubbish, once buried by campers, had been exposed by storm surges and pushed onto the adjacent birrida with most of it accumulating, along with other debris, at the high watermark. On the second day the team split up into two groups. The larger group went to



Above left Cleaning up the birrida at Withnell Point.

Above Carrying out bags of rubbish.

Below A humpback whale slapping the water.

“The clean-up was a small but important part of a broader vision for Dirk Hartog Island National Park: the *Return to 1616* project.”

Mystery Beach on the western side of the island. This long bay acts as a natural trap for flotsam and kept the group extremely busy for the whole day. The second team stayed on the eastern side and went beachcombing for rubbish south of Cape Levillian. Their ‘debris collection’ included various remains of a recreational fishing boat that was shipwrecked close to the cape only a few weeks earlier.

Undoubtedly, the dirtiest job was cleaning out a tank that, until recently, had been misused by campers as a rubbish tip. Everyone involved in the project pitched in to help and surely none of them will ever forget the terrible smell of rotten food along with the fine dust that hung around the tank while the rubbish was shovelled into bags. But good company, plenty of enjoyable breaks, lots of shared laughs and some sightseeing in between jobs, such as a visit to Cape Inscription, certainly outweighed the few darker moments of volunteer work and made the trip worthwhile.

THE RUBBISH

The rubbish collected over the three days was diverse and the large bags were quickly filled with cans, bottles, broken glass, plastic bags, bait containers, shoes, ropes, unidentifiable pieces of plastic, fishing line, tetra packs and many other

reminders of consumables. Debris that was too large to be bagged included crates, buckets, treated wood and drums (some of them still filled with transmission fluid or fuel). Overall about three tonnes of rubbish were collected. However, collection was only one part of the job; the other was itemising it. A considerable amount of time was spent filling out data collection sheets and placing each item into one of 55 possible categories. The data collected was provided to the Australian Marine Debris Database coordinated by the Tangaroa Blue Foundation – a not-for-profit organisation focused on protecting our oceans.

Funded by Coastwest, the \$20,000 clean-up was a joint project between Parks and Wildlife and the Yadgalah Aboriginal Corporation, with Denham resident Keith Capewell as their representative in the clean-up.

THE VISION

The clean-up was a small but important part of a broader vision for Dirk Hartog Island National Park: the *Return to 1616* project. The aim of this ambitious project is to restore the vegetation and diversity of native animals as they occurred back in 1616 when Dirk Hartog visited, so that future generations will be able to experience the island as it was. An

extensive weed eradication program and the complete removal of sheep, goats and feral cats will be followed by the reintroduction of native fauna species such as the chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*) and the rufous hare-wallaby (*Lagorchestes hirsutus*).

Another animal that has benefited greatly from conservation efforts over the years is the majestic humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), which entertained the group during their crossing back to Denham. ‘Aahing’ and ‘oohing’ in admiration, the volunteers watched a couple of whales breaching in the most spectacular manner, while others lay sideways in the water and slapped their massive flippers on the water’s surface ... which we took as them waving goodbye.



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