

Touched by nature



Doug Coughran: a man of stature

Well-known and respected marine mammal expert, Doug Coughran AM, the former Department of Parks and Wildlife's very own 'Wildlife Warrior', passed away earlier this year after a long and illustrious career. He leaves behind a legacy that includes whale rescue techniques that he was largely instrumental in developing, which are practised not just in Western Australia but around the world, as well as fond memories among those who knew him.

by Peter Dans, Carolyn Thomson-Dans and Cameron Craigie

On Monday 14 July 1980 a 28-year-old Douglas Keith Coughran presented for work as a trainee wildlife officer with the then Department of Fisheries and Wildlife. Within six months he was made permanent with his supervisor at the time referring to him as “a dedicated, efficient and studious wildlife officer – always reading informative and instructive books on flora and fauna to increase his already sound knowledge”. This was the beginning of a long and productive career, which culminated in him becoming renowned and respected around the world as an expert in marine mammal rescue and disentanglement. Throughout his career, he was a leader and an innovator who worked passionately and tirelessly on behalf of all wildlife.

FIRST MASS STRANDINGS

In the early days of the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), Doug formed close friendships and professional collaborations with then Atlantis Marine Park veterinarian Dr Nick Gales (now the Director of the Australian Antarctic Division) and Greg Pobar, then CALM’s Marmion Marine Park manager. With others, like fellow wildlife officers Peter Lambert and Dave Mell, they worked side-by-side on two mass strandings of false killer whales at Augusta in 1986 and 1988 that captured the world’s attention.

Following these two events in almost identical locations only two years apart, Doug worked tirelessly to assemble and train volunteer organisations, develop emergency response plans to deal with marine mammal strandings and oil spills, and collect information and DNA samples for research being done by Nick and others.

Doug always placed a concerted emphasis on training and readiness. He and his colleagues worked to ensure there were trained professionals and an army of trained volunteers ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice, as well as specially developed equipment and stakeholders, such as professional fishers,



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Main Doug Coughran leaves a lasting impression on those who knew him, and a legacy in marine mammal conservation. *Illustration – Gooitzen van der Meer/DBCA*

Above Doug (centre) was involved in managing the response to mass whale strandings from the 1980s.

Right Pauline Goodreid, Doug and John Edwards after the successful disentanglement of a humpback calf off Albany. *Photos – DBCA*



ready to help out with boats and anything else required. Doug also understood the enormous value of good public relations and developed a close relationship with the news media, ensuring that communications plans were developed hand in hand with action plans. No details were ever left to chance.

In the early 1990s, Doug was instrumental in developing the management arrangements for the fledgling whale watching industry off Perth and, in doing so, spent many hours at sea in ‘his’ beloved wildlife protection patrol vessels *Pseudorca II* and then *Pseudorca III*, ensuring the industry and the management arrangements evolved sustainably with animal welfare at the fore.

DISENTANGLING LEVIATHANS

In the early to mid-1990s, as the humpback whale population really started to recover, the first reported

entanglements were experienced along the Western Australian coast. Doug led the charge and from 1992 CALM began to explore the techniques and tools required to safely attempt disentanglements. A highly trained specialist team was also formed and, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Doug could be found sitting at the front end of the inflatable boat or directing people like John Edwards, Peter Lambert or Peter Dans from the mothership, whenever a whale was in trouble.

Through this period, Doug further developed his excellent working relationship with the media, and became the go-to departmental spokesperson for all incidents involving whales, dolphins, seals and sea-lions.

Doug was always looking for new information and better ways to do things, and he was always open to new ideas. His thirst for knowledge and new techniques saw him receive a prestigious Churchill



Fellowship in June 2004. The fellowship enabled him to travel to the east coast of the United States for eight weeks to study whale disentanglement techniques, tools, procedures and protocols and, importantly, see first-hand the collaborations between marine managers and the fishing industry designed to avoid and minimise entanglements.

In 2006, following a spate of mid-year entanglements, the then Environment Minister Mark McGowan (now Premier of Western Australia) called an urgent roundtable meeting with representatives from the fishing industry. Doug was critical in building working relationships with these stakeholders and developing changes to fishing techniques to help minimise entanglements. So effective were Doug's efforts in working with the fishing industry that in late 2006 he was awarded the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council's Environment Award.

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SAFETY AND COLLABORATIONS

Many would recall receiving emails from Doug that were signed off ‘stay safe’ and, during his years of overseeing whale disentanglements, he had an unwavering focus on the safety of the people involved. This was the impetus for him developing a nationally accredited course in large whale disentanglements, which saw him train and mentor departmental staff around the State as well as delivering the training to personnel in other Australian states and territories, and in New Zealand

Top left Then Environment Minister (now Premier) Mark McGowan (centre) met with Doug and the department's whale disentanglement team (Peter Lambert, Rick Dawson and John Edwards) after a spate of entanglements in 2006.

Top Doug travelled throughout WA training staff and volunteers in safe practices for marine mammal conservation.

Above left Doug carried out his work with a focus on safety and preparedness.
Photos – DBCA

Above Throughout his career, Doug was involved in the rescue of more than 70 whales.
Photo – Doug Coughran/DBCA



Above left Doug was also an esteemed photographer, whose work has often been published in *LANDSCOPE* and other departmental publications.
Photo – Doug Coughran

Above Doug was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in the 2010 Queen’s Birthday Honours List.
Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Left Doug was instrumental in developing guidelines for WA’s whale watching industry.

Below Doug was also a keen birdwatcher.
Photos – Doug Coughran



and South Africa. Doug retained close connections with those he had trained and mentored, and maintained a global whale disentanglement network to share information and lessons learned from disentanglement efforts around the world.

During his 36 years as a wildlife officer, Doug developed successful operational and research partnerships with the department’s scientists and regional staff (see ‘Scientific serendipity’, *LANDSCOPE*, Spring 2015). He collaborated with staff at other government agencies including Rottneest Island and Perth Zoo, as well as Murdoch University and other institutions nationally and internationally.

Doug co-authored 18 research papers and has been cited in 126 other papers in the field of marine mammals. In 2013 Doug presented a paper on the techniques he had pioneered for the humane euthanasia of large whales to the International Whaling Commission in London. His recommendations were

adopted unanimously. Doug was also a member of the International Whaling Commission’s Expert Advisory Panel on entanglement response. During his career he rescued more than 70 whales.

Doug’s achievements were formally recognised in the 2010 Queen’s Birthday Honours List when he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for “service to conservation and the environment, particularly through the disentanglement of whales, as both a practitioner and educator”.

ENDURING LEGACY

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions is currently having a new marine patrol vessel built. The vessel will be Perth based and will be tasked with responding to marine mammal incidents, managing the commercial whale watching industry, and carrying out marine park, river and island patrol duties. The vessel, which is due to be launched in October, will be named the *D. K. COUGHRAN* to recognise the

significant contribution Doug made to the protection and conservation of the State’s marine animals and his tireless work in innovation and safety.

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