



Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park

Often referred to as a 'jewel' in Western Australia's crown, the spectacular coral reef surrounding the Houtman Abrolhos islands, has long been recognised as a magnificent snorkelling and diving destination. In July 2019, the special terrestrial values of the Houtman Abrolhos islands were acknowledged with the creation of the State's 101st national park. This will provide greater protection for the natural and cultural values, while realising opportunities for increased tourism.

On 29 July 1619, Dutch explorer Frederik de Houtman sighted a chain of low-lying islands in what was thought to be open ocean while on board a Dutch East India ship bound for Indonesia. He likely named the Abrolhos after the Portuguese sailors' warning cry of 'abre os olhos' or 'open your eyes'.

This archipelago of 192 islands and islets, consists of three clusters of islands (Wallabi, Easter and Pelsaert Groups) and is located 60 kilometres off the Midwest coast of Western Australia.

ANCIENT LANDSCAPE

The basis of the island clusters is an ancient limestone reef platform that began

forming, layer upon layer, from coral 120,000 to 130,000 years ago when sea levels were much lower than today. As sea levels rose, the coral grew upwards, gradually building the platform over thousands of years.

Today, the coral reef that perches atop these ancient platforms is recognised as the southernmost coral reef system in the Indian and Pacific oceans. The ancient reef platforms and the coral reef lying on top have been created by the Leeuwin Current flowing south from the tropics, bringing warm tropical waters laden with coral larvae that settle and grow, building coral reefs.

During the last ice age, when sea levels were much lower than today, the islands became part of mainland Western Australia.

However, they were separated again by rising sea levels approximately 8000 years ago. This enabled plants and animals, to colonise the islands and evolve in isolation, giving rise to a unique suite of flora and fauna, some of which are found nowhere else on Earth. This high biodiversity also results from the islands' location at the point where northern and southern regions cross over. This overlap accommodates an eclectic mix of both tropical and temperate species, reminiscent of the Galapagos Islands.

In order to protect these conservation values, while providing opportunities for people to appreciate them, the Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park was declared in July 2019, exactly



**Journey to Houtman
Abrolhos Islands
National Park**

Scan this QR code or visit
Parks and Wildlife Service's
'LANDSCOPE' playlist on
YouTube.

400 years to the day after Houtman's discovery. The park includes islands and land not occupied by existing fishing and aquaculture operations. Occupied areas and waters around the islands remain the responsibility of Fisheries within the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD).

NATURALLY UNIQUE

From the only resident marsupial species – the tammar wallaby (*Notamacropus eugenii*), to the 200 native plants species, 25 reptile species and more than 100 species of birds, the plants and animals of the islands have one thing in common: they are all extremely hardy, being able to survive the harsh conditions of life on rugged coastal islands.

The islands are home to astonishing numbers of birds, both resident and migrant, and the snowstorm of millions of birds in breeding season is a spectacular sight indeed; early explorers likened them to swarms of bees. The islands form the largest and most species-rich seabird breeding area in Australian waters and in the eastern Indian Ocean. In addition to seabirds, the islands provide vital habitat for many shorebirds and migratory waders

that fly from as far away as Siberia to Western Australia each year. These include several critically endangered species like the curlew sandpiper, great knot, eastern curlew and bar-tailed godwit. The inevitable by-product of so many birds using the islands is a build-up of guano that was so abundant it was mined for fertiliser between 1847 and 1946. Relics of this industry can still be seen on several of the islands today.

The wonders of the islands continue in the surrounding waters where the curious Australian sea lion (*Neophoca cinerea*) – one of the world's rarest pinnipeds (marine mammals possessing front and rear flippers), can be spotted in the area. Visitors are often treated to the sight of playful Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops aduncus*) riding the waves of boats and, between June and November, migrating humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) can be seen breaching on the horizon.

The high biodiversity continues beneath the waves with algae and 184 species of coral creating magnificent gardens among the seagrass meadows that together provide habitat for 389 fish species.

EXPLORING THE ISLANDS

Day trip and scenic flights are available from Geraldton or Kalbarri, which enable visitors to enjoy the aquamarine blue and green patchwork quilt of the islands from the air and picnic at East Wallabi Island's Turtle Bay, before snorkelling the dive trail that showcases a kaleidoscope of colour from coral and fish.

Visitors can dive into maritime history to learn about the 19 wrecks that have been discovered at the Abrolhos, including Beacon Island's chilling tale of murder and

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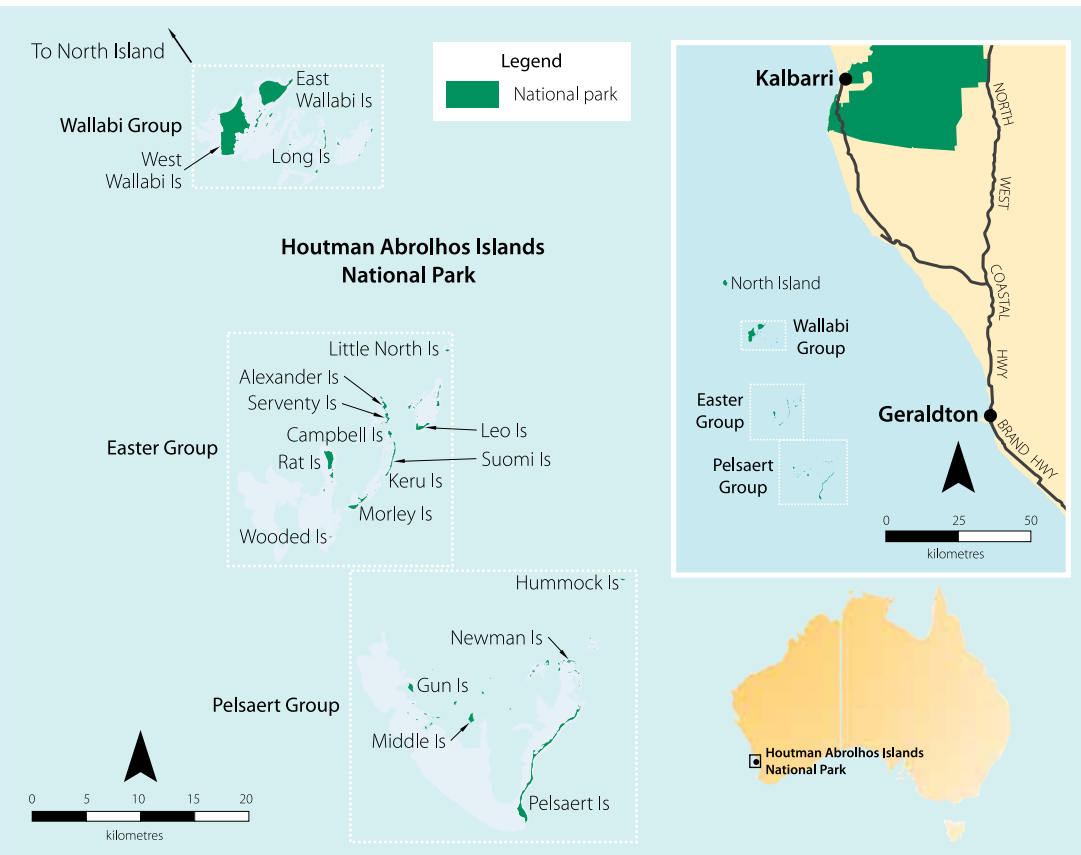
The islands are important breeding habitats for millions of seabirds.

Top left Australian sea lions occur in the area.
Photos – Chris Surman/Halfmoon Biosciences

Above left Tammar wallabies are one species that have evolved in isolation in the archipelago.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above The stunning archipelago can be viewed on board one of the scenic flights that operate in the area.
Photo – David Bettini

Parks for people Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park



mutiny on the *Batavia*, which wrecked on Morning Reef in 1629.

For visitors who want to test their sea legs, there are a number of charter boat tours that operate out of Geraldton and Kalbarri. These offer packages and experiences that include bird and wildlife watching as well as diving and snorkelling. While under water, visitors may see a raft of species including wrasse, parrotfish and clownfish darting in and around the coral of myriad shapes, sizes and colours. Boat tours also offer fishing and the opportunity to drop anchor and land on some of the islands, where visitors can enjoy a picnic or beach walk.

PLAN FOR OUR PARKS

Houtman Abrolhos Islands National Park is the first conservation reserve to

Top right Coastal caper (*Capparis spinosa*).
Photo – Wendy Payne/DBCA

Above right The islands are home to millions of birds including, seabird, shorebird and migratory waders.
Photo – Chris Surman/Halfmoon Biosciences

be created under the Plan for Our Parks initiative, which will see five million hectares of new national and marine parks and conservation reserves added to Western Australia's conservation estate over the next five years. The national park will protect 105 of the 122 islands in the archipelago. Ten million dollars has been committed to the 'Sustainable Tourism Development for the Abrolhos Islands' project, which will focus on three key areas – effective management of the Abrolhos through inter-agency collaboration; growing sustainable tourism in the area; and improving visitor infrastructure and management. As part of this, new jetties, toilets, shade shelters, walk trails and visitor interpretation will be developed on East Wallabi and Beacon islands. The airstrip on East Wallabi Island will also be upgraded.

Additional funding has been secured for the ongoing management of the national park, including for the employment of rangers. And commercial tourism operator licensing will be introduced in 2020, to encourage more visitors to the area while protecting its natural and cultural values for the future.

Do it yourself

Where is it? 60 kilometres west of Geraldton.

Activities: Snorkelling, diving, bird and wildlife watching, beachwalking and fishing.

Nearest Parks and Wildlife Service Office:
201 Foreshore Drive Geraldton WA 6530,
Phone: (08) 9964 0901

Help us care for the environment by respecting the wildlife that inhabits islands and keeping your distance from sea lions and nesting birds or bird colonies to avoid disturbance. Walk only along beaches or designated walking tracks to avoid crushing ground or burrow nesting birds and remember to take all your rubbish with you when you leave. And consider experiencing the area with a licensed tour operator.