



# Ningaloo Coast news

Autumn 2014

## World Heritage Committee

The Ningaloo Coast World Heritage Advisory Committee held its inaugural meeting in February 2014. The committee has 11 members with a wide array of interests. Members include marine and terrestrial scientists as well as representatives from Aboriginal groups, tourism, industry, conservation and community. The committee will play a key role in providing advice on high level issues to both State and Federal Environment Ministers and is a key communication forum for stakeholders, government agencies and the community.

For more information about the committee please contact Chelsea Godson on 9947 8000 or [chelsea.godson@dpaw.wa.gov.au](mailto:chelsea.godson@dpaw.wa.gov.au).



The Ningaloo Coast World Heritage Advisory Committee members and State and Federal government agency representatives at the Vlamingh Head Lighthouse during a field trip organised as part of the inaugural meeting of the committee.

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## Fishing line entangles pelicans

About seven billion tonnes of marine debris including fishing gear, plastic bags, bottles, food wrappers, cigarette butts and ropes enter the world's oceans each year entangling, strangling, choking or starving about one million seabirds and 100,000 turtles and marine mammals.

Marine debris is a major threat to marine life in the Ningaloo Marine Park and Exmouth Gulf. In the past four months two pelicans have been found entangled in discarded fishing line in the marina. Local residents, with assistance from Parks and Wildlife staff, did a fantastic job in disentangling them. Other local marine life affected includes whales entangled in rope and fishing gear and whale sharks injured by fishing line and hooks.

Ways you can help:

- Keep Exmouth plastic bag free.
- Put all rubbish (including fishing line and equipment) in the bin.
- Participate in clean up days.

An injury caused by fishing line. One of the two pelicans found entangled in fishing line in the Exmouth marina.



The thorny devil (*Moloch horridus*) is the area's most distinctive dragon. Picture: Johnny Gaskell

## Distinctive dragons

The dragons of the Ningaloo Coast are lizards that, unlike mythical dragons, can't fly, don't breathe fire but still have unusual characteristics.

A body of spikes and a pair of devil-like horns makes the thorny devil (*Moloch horridus*), also known as the thorny dragon, a scary sight. But at less than 20cm long, this slow-moving creature feeds only on small black ants. Each ant is picked up individually with its tongue and up to 5000 can be devoured in a single feed! The thorny devil's colours change providing camouflage against its sand and spinifex home and its spikes are a defence against predators. To survive in an arid environment, water from the morning dew

and damp sand is collected in the tiny channels between the scales on its belly and legs. Despite its weird looks, the thorny devil manages to attract a mate. Its elaborate courtship rituals include leg-waving and head-bobbing.

Other dragons of the Ningaloo Coast include the bearded dragon (*Pogona minor*), western netted dragon (*Ctenophorus reticulatus*), long-nosed ta-ta dragon (*Amphibolurus longirostris*) and Gilbert's ta-ta dragon (*A. gilberti*), best known for its 'hand-waving' antics and bursts of speed.

When driving watch out for reptiles warming themselves and looking for food on roads. It is illegal to take reptiles without a licence. Please contact the Parks and Wildlife Exmouth office on 9947 8000 if you see anyone collecting reptiles.

## It's the little ones that count

Summer is when many coral reef fish spawn and reproduce. After hatching and spending the first few weeks in the open ocean as tiny transparent larvae, the baby fish return to the shallower waters of Ningaloo Reef. They often undergo dramatic transformations at this point, changing colour, size and shape to adapt to life among the coral, algae and mangroves. While frequently unnoticed due to their small size (often as tiny as 7mm) and cryptic behaviour, this is when many species are at their most colourful and spectacular. This period is referred to as 'recruitment' and is critical to replenishing adult fish populations.



A juvenile chevron butterflyfish (*Chaetodon trifacialis*).

## Weeding out kapok

Kapok bush (*Aerva javanica*) is an invasive weed species that has spread throughout Exmouth town, the VLF towers, the Lighthouse and Yardie Homestead caravan parks, along Yardie Creek Road and on some of the Gulf Islands.

Several of these areas are identified as priorities for weed management to help keep Cape Range National Park free of this invasive species and minimise the impact on island ecosystems. Cape Range has a high biodiversity of native flora and fauna, a key reason for the World Heritage listing of the Ningaloo Coast. Fast growing weeds such as kapok have the potential to outcompete and displace native vegetation, which impacts on native invertebrates such as lizards (through habitat loss) and grazers such as red kangaroos (as kapok is not a preferred food option).

In 2013, the kapok eradication program was expanded. Parks and Wildlife staff, with assistance from the Lighthouse and Yardie Homestead caravan park owners, the Department of Defence and Hale School students, have sprayed and removed weeds in these priority areas. These efforts have reduced the kapok population, however ongoing efforts are required to keep the population in check.

Please help minimise the spread of weeds by checking your footwear, clothing, equipment, vessel and caravan for seeds before going on to an island or entering a national park. The department thanks everyone for their contributions.



Hale School students pulled out hundreds of kapok plants and collected their seeds for safe disposal. Picture: Hale School

Researchers from Parks and Wildlife, the Australian Institute of Marine Science and Australian National University recently completed their annual survey of juvenile fish communities in Ningaloo Marine Park.

Results show that some fish species prefer particular areas. The protected and coral rich back-reef areas of the lagoon provide habitat for butterflyfish. Other fish, such as emperors, recruit solely to the algal fields in the shallow lagoon. Researchers have noted there is great variation in fish recruitment in different years. This year's surveys recorded moderate levels, which were possibly related to the sustained south-westerly winds and moderate water temperatures.

This research assists in identifying critical habitats for fish recruitment and locating potential 'hotspots' where recruitment is consistently high.

## Whale shark management, tours a world leader

Late last year, representatives from Parks and Wildlife and the Ningaloo whale shark industry attended the 3rd International Whale Shark Conference. The latest findings in whale shark biology, ecology and the new emerging tourism hotspots were presented at the conference attended by representatives from more than 20 countries. Our representatives also provided input into the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List assessment of whale shark populations. Based on this assessment, their status is still 'vulnerable'.

At the conference, Ningaloo Marine Park whale shark management was highlighted as the world's leading model for whale shark ecotourism and conservation (an updated plan was released in November 2013). Numerous countries have adopted variations of our program to address the problem of declining whale shark sightings. Ningaloo whale shark operators are highly regarded and considered to have the world's best whale shark tours for visitors – some countries have up to 100 boats at a time viewing whale sharks!

For whale shark sightings and information please contact Dani Rob on 9947 8006 or [whaleshark@dpaw.wa.gov.au](mailto:whaleshark@dpaw.wa.gov.au).



Ningaloo's whale shark management model has been recognised as a world leader. Picture: Migration Media

To receive a copy of this newsletter electronically please email [exmouth@dpaw.wa.gov.au](mailto:exmouth@dpaw.wa.gov.au).

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