

Ningaloo Coast

World Heritage area

fact sheet

Cultural & European History

Exmouth and the surrounding North West Cape has a rich and colourful history.

Cultural History

Indigenous people have had a long cultural connection with the Cape Range Peninsula. Many historical remains have been found along the Ningaloo Coast including middens, fish traps, burial grounds and one of the world's oldest pieces of jewellery - the 30,000 year old 'Mandu Mandu' shell jewellery. The Gnulli native title claim was registered in 1997 in order to pursue formal recognition of the ongoing connection of Baiyungu, Thalanyji and Yinikurtira people to the Ningaloo Coast.



30,000 year old aboriginal jewellery found near Mandu Mandu within Cape Range National Park

Credit: Western Australia Museum

European History

The first European landing was by the Dutch Captain Williem Janz of the Mauritius in 1618.

The next visit was by another Dutchman Willem de Vlamingh in 1696 who named the North West Cape and Australian Captain Phillip Parker King surveyed the area in 1818 naming the Exmouth Gulf in honour of Viscount Exmouth.



The SS Mildura wreck in 1907 led to the construction of the Vlaming Head Lighthouse (commissioned in 1912)

Credit: Tony Howard



Vlamingh head lighthouse is no longer in operation but has been carefully restored and is the only lighthouse in Australia that can still function via kerosene lamp

Credit: Natasha Tate

Ship Wrecks

The Ningaloo Coast has a significant boating history from explorers, traders, pearl luggers, whaling and fishing. Due to the treacherous coastline, it is a graveyard for many ships.

A well-known shipwreck and tale of survival is the Barque Stefano in 1875. The 2 survivors were rescued by local indigenous people who helped them for 3 months to travel to the North West Cape so they could be rescued by a pearling cutter.

Pearling

Pearlers regularly scoured the Cape between 1818 and 1899. The pearling fleet in the Exmouth Gulf was decimated by a cyclone in 1876 and the industry relocated to Broome where it remains an important part of the Western Australian economy.



Credit: Shire of Exmouth

Whaling

Whaling was a major industry from 1913 - 1957 at Norwegian Bay (Point Cloates) profiting from the whale oil and fertilizer produced. This was a boom and bust cycle as whale numbers dwindled but never fully recovered. Since whaling ceased in Western Australia the humpback whale population has grown significantly.



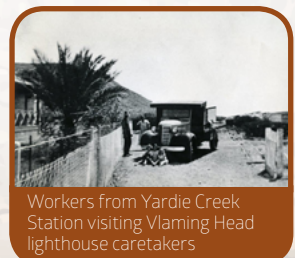
Whaling was a major industry until 1957

Credit: Western Australia Museum

Pastoral Stations

The pastoral industry began in 1876 with the establishment of Minilya Station which covered

the Cape Range Peninsula. Over time, this area and southern coastline has been subdivided into numerous stations. Yardie Creek Station was acquired by the government and formed the core of Cape Range National Park, which was established in 1964. Today most stations also offer a range of unique tourist accommodation including wilderness camping along the coast or outback station stay.



Credit: Western Australia Museum

WWII

In 1942, North West Cape became involved in WWII. The US navy established a secret submarine base in the area under the code name Operation Potshot.

More on Cultural & European History



The Potshot Base was bombed by the Japanese during WWII. This area is now a memorial site



An aircraft early warning radar was set-up on Vlamingh Head to warn of approaching Japanese Bombers

Credit: Western Australia Museum

Many of the streets in Exmouth are named in honour of Australian, British and American servicemen who took part in operations of WWII.

Discovery of Oil and Gas

In the early 1950s Australia's first oil "strike" on land occurred in the area at Rough Range (south of Learmonth). However, further exploration showed it was not commercially viable.

Today, offshore oil and gas exploration and mining is a major industry with rigs visible on the horizon.



Oil exploration on the North West Cape in the 1950's

Credit: Kallis

Fishing

The first recorded commercial fishing in Exmouth Gulf was in 1960 with a small mullet operation. Today, commercial species include the world famous prawns, mullet, whiting and mackerel. Recreational fishing has also been very important to Exmouth including game fishing for marlin and sailfish. The Ningaloo Marine Park was established in 1987.



The prawn industry began in the 1960's and Exmouth prawns are now famous worldwide

Credit: Shire of Exmouth

Exmouth Town and Communication Towers

In 1963, due to the escalating Cold War, the Australian and US governments agreed to establish a U.S. Naval Communications Station on North West Cape. The station is an array of 13 sky-scraping towers which covers an area of 400 hectares. Tower Zero (the main Very Low Frequency transmitter in the centre) is 388 metres high, weighs 800 tonnes, has concrete foundations 17 metres deep and can

withstand winds of up to 500km/hour. It is one of the tallest structures in the southern hemisphere.

The town of Exmouth was established to service the Communication Station and was officially opened in 1967, on the same day the Station was commissioned. The Station was renamed in 1968 after the Australian Prime Minister Harold E. Holt, who disappeared while swimming in Victoria.

The Communication Station base was originally classified as US territory - the US staff had their own US supermarket and bar, used US currency, the internal roads were right hand drive and most of the vehicles were imported from the US. It was a thriving mini community and even included a bowling alley, Baseball pitch, swimming pool and diving boards.

US Defence forces started to withdraw in 1992 and the Australian

Navy officially took over in 1999 under the command of the first woman in charge of a Naval Base in Australia, Sue Jones. The station was then turned over to civilian contractors in 2002. The facility continues to play a vital role in defence operations today. Exmouth now has a range of industries including oil and gas, fishing, pastoral and is globally known as an eco-tourism destination.

Historical Sites

Visit these historical sites to learn more about the fascinating history of the North West Cape:

- Vlamingh Head Interpretive Precinct
- Potshot Memorial site
- Giant prawn at the Ningaloo Visitor Centre
- Mildura Wreck
- Ningaloo Visitor Centre
- Milyering Discovery Centre



The Very Low Frequency Communications towers led to the establishment of Exmouth Town

Credit: Shire of Exmouth



The communications base was originally run like a mini US town

Credit: Shire of Exmouth