

Meeting 23 Communiqué

May 2025 | Denham, Western Australia

The Shark Bay World Heritage Advisory Committee met in Denham from 25 to 27 May 2025 for its 23rd meeting.

SITE VISITS

The Committee undertook a field trip on 27 May 2025 to the Woormel Seagrass Bank and Nanga National Park.

Marine Ecosystem Resilience:

At the Woormel Seagrass Bank, the Committee observed signs of ecological recovery following past marine heatwaves, including regrowth in *Amphibolis* and *Posidonia* seagrass meadows. The site's remoteness offers natural protection but presents challenges for ongoing monitoring. Discussions highlighted the critical role of seagrass meadows in carbon sequestration and sediment stability, and the need for improved understanding of mangrove systems and their ecological functions within Shark Bay.

Terrestrial Landscape Management:

At Nanga National Park, the Committee viewed drought-affected shrublands and discussed the impacts of feral goats, fire risk, and weed invasion. The visit underscored the importance of adaptive land management strategies, including pest control and fire planning. Members emphasised the value of integrating cultural knowledge into conservation efforts and recognised the urgency of addressing landscape-scale degradation to protect Shark Bay's terrestrial World Heritage values.

KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

Climate Change and Environmental Stressors

The Committee addressed the growing threat of climate change to the Shark Bay World Heritage Area, particularly the impact of marine heatwaves.

Recent data highlighted the severity of the 2024–2025 marine heatwave, with thermal stress levels comparable to the 2011 event. These conditions threaten seagrass meadows, coral ecosystems, and fisheries—key components of Shark Bay's Outstanding Universal Value.

The Committee reviewed ecological monitoring results, discussed the need for updated seagrass mapping, and agreed to provide advice to the IUCN highlighting the implications of recent marine heatwave events. Members emphasised the importance of transparent reporting and real-time monitoring.

The Committee concluded that climate change remains a critical risk to the World Heritage Area and advocated for stronger recognition of these threats in global assessments. They reaffirmed their commitment to supporting science-based management responses and data sharing.

Joint Management and Cultural Integration

The Committee welcomed updates from two DBCA Joint Management Planners, highlighting joint efforts in Caring for Country through ranger programs, cultural heritage initiatives, and terrestrial management planning.

Members reaffirmed the vital role of Traditional Owners in shaping the future of the World Heritage Area and supported the integration of cultural values in management and future assessments. The Committee acknowledged the broader movement to recognise cultural significance in World Heritage listings and committed to walking alongside Traditional Owners in the journey to achieve recognition of Gathaagudu (Shark Bay) within this framework.

Fisheries Management and Sustainability

The Committee reviewed the current state of fisheries management in the Shark Bay World Heritage Area, with input from DPIRD on patrol operations, recreational fishing trends, and stakeholder engagement. While no major compliance issues were reported, concerns were raised about community confusion around Pink Snapper regulations and the sustainability of practices during local fishing competitions. Members also emphasised the importance of culturally respectful policies that uphold Aboriginal fishing rights.

The Committee acknowledged recent improvements in enforcement, education, and joint patrol efforts, and supported DPIRD's initiatives to strengthen data collection and community outreach. They encouraged closer collaboration with the Marine Advisory Committee, the development of a local customary fishing accord, and enhanced public education on sustainable fishing. Members concluded that while management is largely effective, there is a need for clearer communication, stronger cultural inclusion, and continued alignment of fisheries practices with the World Heritage values of Shark Bay.

Governance and Planning

The Committee considered governance and planning frameworks for the Shark Bay World Heritage Area, noting that key documents — including *Marine Reserves Management Plan* (1996–2006), and the *Shark Bay World Heritage Property Strategic Plan 2008-2020* — are outdated. Members acknowledged the complexity of updating these plans and the Committee supports the ongoing work of Joint Management for the terrestrial reserves in genuine partnership with Traditional Owners.

The Committee also discussed the IUCN Outlook Assessment process, noting concerns about transparency, limited direct engagement with the Committee and unclear methodology. Members emphasised the need for more integrated planning that reflects both current environmental conditions and cultural values. The Committee reaffirmed its commitment to providing advice to strengthen governance, support more inclusive and timely planning updates, and ensure local expertise and knowledge are better represented in national and international reporting processes.

Funding and Budget

The Committee discussed ongoing financial constraints impacting its operations and the broader management of the World Heritage Area. Members noted that the longstanding Commonwealth contribution of \$140,000 per annum through the Australian Government's World Heritage Management funding program, which supports the operation of the Advisory Committee, has remained unchanged for many years. This funding does not reflect the size and complexity of looking after Shark Bay, especially given its remote location, rising costs of living, and the growing demands of World Heritage advisory work.

Visitor Management and Education

The Committee discussed the growing pressures of tourism on key sites within the World Heritage Area, including vehicle access, habitat disturbance, and unsustainable practices at sensitive locations such as Little Lagoon and Hamelin Pool. Fishing competitions were also noted as a concern, particularly in relation to sustainability and on-site fish processing.

Members emphasised the need for improved signage, interpretation, and responsible tourism education, and supported engagement with stakeholders and local community to align visitor management with conservation priorities. The Committee reaffirmed its commitment to promoting responsible tourism and protecting the property's ecological and cultural values.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The Committee received updates from key stakeholders, including presentations from state and federal government agencies. DCCEEW provided updates on national heritage matters, world heritage grants, and the IUCN Outlook process. DBCA provided updates on governance developments and marine park activities. The Committee also discussed strengthening relationships with both the Malgana Aboriginal Corporation and Nanda Aboriginal Corporations, improving communication channels, and inviting stakeholders such as Tourism WA and Strandline Resources to future meetings.

The Shark Bay World Heritage Advisory Committee remains committed to protecting and promoting the World Heritage values of Gathaagudu (Shark Bay) and will continue to provide guidance to all levels of government, stakeholders, and the community.

NEXT MEETING

In Person Meeting No.24 is scheduled in Denham for 30th November – 2nd December 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Committee wishes to thank the following for making the 23rd SBWHAC meeting a success:
Old Pearler Restaurant, Shark Bay Bakery, Heritage Resort, Boughshed Restaurant, Perfect Nature Cruises, , Wildsights Villas, DBCA, DPIRD and DCCEEW

Contact

The Committee welcomes community and stakeholder engagement. Contact the Chair C/O Alicja Szczepanska, Executive Officer, Shark Bay World Heritage Advisory Committee.
sbwhac@dbca.wa.gov.au or (08) 9948 2210