



SHARK BAY

WORLD HERITAGE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Communiqué 21

Denham / Gathaagudu, Western Australia

May 2024

The Shark Bay World Heritage Advisory Committee met in Denham / Gathaagudu from 19–21 May 2024 to consider matters relating to the protection, conservation and management of the Shark Bay World Heritage Area and its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV).

Global Significance

Shark Bay is internationally recognised for its exceptional natural values, including extensive seagrass meadows, stromatolites, and globally significant marine and terrestrial fauna. The Committee acknowledged the enduring cultural connection of Traditional Owners to Country and recognised the importance of strengthening partnerships to ensure that cultural values are appropriately reflected in future management and planning frameworks.

Seagrass Ecosystems and Climate Resilience

The Committee received detailed briefings on the condition of Shark Bay's seagrass meadows, including evidence of partial natural recovery following the 2010/11 marine heatwave, alongside emerging risks associated with climate change. Members discussed current and proposed seagrass restoration trials, emphasising the need for scientifically robust methodologies, appropriate site selection, and clearly defined success criteria.

While supporting innovation and restoration efforts, the Committee highlighted the importance of aligning projects with best-practice science and ensuring that poorly designed trials do not risk compounding impacts. Building resilience in anticipation of future marine heatwaves was identified as a priority.

Marine Park Management and Visitor Pressures

During an on-water field visit within Shark Bay Marine Park, the Committee observed seagrass habitats, tourism activity, and marine biodiversity firsthand. Members discussed increasing visitor and recreational fishing pressures, including recreational boat anchoring impacts on seagrass, fishing gear debris, and cumulative effects on marine life.

The Committee acknowledged the role of commercial tourism operators in education, stewardship and data collection, while noting the need for consistent management approaches across tenures. Members supported further exploration of mechanisms to improve visitor awareness of World Heritage values and reduce behavioural impacts, including collaborative approaches with tourism and local business groups.

Industry Activities and Environmental Oversight

The Committee engaged with Shark Bay Resources regarding salt production operations within and adjacent to the World Heritage Area. Discussions focused on water abstraction, mangrove monitoring, invasive marine species surveillance, and lessons learned from the Borals Bar breach event.

Members noted the importance of transparent reporting, independent monitoring, and adaptive management to ensure industrial activities do not compromise the OUV of Shark Bay. Opportunities for continued dialogue and site-based engagement were welcomed.

Local Government and Community Challenges

Updates from the Shire of Shark Bay highlighted a range of pressures facing the region, including waste management constraints, including 4,000t- 5,000t of fish offal per year, infrastructure demands, visitor growth, illegal camping, and the ongoing deterioration of key access roads.

The Committee is concerned about delays to the restoration of the Hamelin Pool boardwalk, recognising its significance for both visitor experience and protection of stromatolites. Members emphasised the need for coordinated action to address this long-standing issue.

Joint Management and Future Planning

Progress toward Joint Management with Traditional Owner groups was welcomed, with members noting early achievements in relationship-building and ranger employment. The Committee reaffirmed its role as an ally, committed to supporting collaborative management arrangements as they evolve.

Research, Monitoring and Knowledge Gaps

Updates from research institutions highlighted the Shark Bay Science Plan and the significant funding required to address priority knowledge gaps, particularly in relation to climate change impacts. Members stressed the importance of timely action alongside long-term research, noting that management decisions cannot always wait for complete datasets.

Conclusion

Meeting 21 highlighted Shark Bay's global importance and the increasing challenge of managing pressures such as climate change, tourism, industry, and limited resources. The Committee remains dedicated to offering localised advice to protect Shark Bay's OUV for present and future generations and values ongoing collaboration with government, stakeholders, and the community in managing this significant site.

Next Meeting

A virtual catch-up meeting will be held on 15 August 2024.

Meeting 22 is scheduled to take place in Denham from 1–3 December 2024.

Contact

The Committee welcomes community and stakeholder engagement.

Contact the Chair c/o the Executive Officer, Shark Bay World Heritage Advisory Committee.