

Study finds Exmouth Gulf plays critical role

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by Shannon Beattie | Pilbara News
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A once-in-a-generation report has revealed the staggering level of biodiversity in the Exmouth Gulf and found it contains more species than the World Heritage-listed Ningaloo Reef.

The study, conducted by Dr Ben Fitzpatrick and his colleagues, aimed to reveal the diverse environmental and socioeconomic values of the Gulf through an extensive literature review and additional field surveys.

Dr Fitzpatrick said they always thought the gulf had an exceptional environment, but this report crystallised information from a lot of sources and compiled it in one place for the first time.

"The picture it paints is the Exmouth Gulf has a lot more different sorts of habitats, including extensive mangrove ecosystems, big mud flats, subterranean caves, coral reefs and sea grass," he said.

"It means the species that are supported is, on a whole, far greater than you'd find on the Ningaloo Reef, as an example, there's 850 species of sharks, rays and fish in the gulf compared to just 550 on Ningaloo."

The report revealed the Exmouth Gulf was home to at least 1800 species of fauna, including eight marine mammal species, five species of sea turtles, 63 species of sharks and rays and 790 species of fish.

Dr Fitzpatrick said there were a lot of roles the gulf played in sustaining a whole suite of endangered, threatened or otherwise unique animals.

“The largest animal is the humpback whale and they utilise the gulf as a nursery, plus there’s 15 species of sea snake and there’s only 21 known species in all of WA,” he said. “It’s also the only known pupping area in the world for critically endangered swordfish and is a haven for juvenile shovel nose rays and hawksbill sea turtle, which are both endangered throughout the world.”

Dr Fitzpatrick said while the report identified the gulf contained main globally unique species, it also highlighted there were a lot of gaps in that knowledge.

The report was endorsed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and was a collaboration of Oceanwise Australia, UWA’s Oceans Institute, James Cook University and Curtin University.