

## Uni finds 'remarkable' biodiversity

*Perth Now*

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📷 A university study has found Exmouth Gulf in WA has extensive biodiversity, including whales.

AAP

19 July, 2019 8.46am

A secret nursery where whales whisper to their calves is part of the "remarkable" biodiversity of Western Australia's remote Exmouth Gulf, a scientific study has found.

Boosting calls for the protection of the gulf, alongside the world-heritage listed Ningaloo Reef, the study found 790 species of fish, 63 species of sharks and rays, 173 species of crustaceans and 95 species of birds.

Researchers from the University of Western Australia and Oceanwise Australia were also surprised to find 15 species of sea snakes, including two thought to be extinct.

But the report also found that the gulf was vulnerable to climate change and other human impacts, including industrial development, despite many state and federal agencies and international bodies recommending its protection over the past 40 years.

Research fellow Ben Fitzpatrick says the gulf is an important nursery for a range of vulnerable species and a globally significant pupping site for the endangered green sawfish.

It also supports endangered juvenile hawksbill turtles and is one of the world's most significant whale nurseries, playing an essential part in one of the greatest conservation successes, the recovery of humpback whale populations.

"It is a quiet place where the whales need only whisper to their calves, enabling them to feed, rest, elude detection by predators and raise them successfully," Dr Fitzpatrick said.

"Keeping Exmouth Gulf quiet will be the key to the ongoing success of our humpback whales and the sustainable ecotourism industries worth millions of dollars annually to local communities."

Protection of the area was now paramount to ensure its continued existence as a haven for multiple species and as a site of global significance.

"Our study has highlighted that the biodiversity, social and economic value of this area is far greater than previously known and that the gulf is a very significant ecosystem that deserves study and protection," Dr Fitzpatrick said.

The Protect Ningaloo campaign welcomed the findings and said the study showed the "staggering" significance of the area's biodiversity.

"The extraordinary scope of the findings in this study confirms the gulf as a globally significant ecosystem," campaigner Jeremy Tager said.