

Protecting Ningaloo is a cause many support, but the fight is far from over

Ningaloo Reef has become a WA icon, but its pristine waters haven't always been easy to protect. It took campaigners years to ensure its conservation. Now, a project to build a pipeline fabrication facility threatens to endanger the reef's fragile ecosystem again.

By **Paul Gamblin**

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On a blindingly clear Perth summer day in 2002, as WA's new Maritime Museum opened in Fremantle Harbour, 15,000 people gathered a few hundred metres away to support the conservation of Ningaloo Reef.

Today, it's hard to imagine heritage-listed Ningaloo being treated with anything less than due care. Of course we'll go the extra mile to conserve the reef, won't we?

But in the early 2000s that wasn't a foregone conclusion. Not by a long shot.



Ningaloo Reef has become a WA icon, but it's pristine waters haven't always been easy to protect. Now, a project to build a pipeline fabrication facility threatens to endanger the reef's fragile ecosystem again. (Photo: Anouska Freedman)

For common sense to prevail, those of us defending Ningaloo had to campaign intensively. Protecting the reef for future generations, creating the conditions for low-impact economic activity in the right places and rejecting the unsustainable alternative. These things took years.

But the Save Ningaloo campaign passed the pub test and our blue and white stickers – tens of thousands of them – were everywhere and on everything, from utes to Mercs, bikes to wheelie bins, in leafy 'burbs and red-dust mining towns.

After that historic Sunday rally, stories went around that many people, including some of Perth's heaviest-hitters, turned up to work next morning a little sun-kissed, a give-away that they'd been there.

For many it was the first time they'd attended a gathering remotely like it. Yet there's something about being on the right side of history, stepping up when it counts.



Heron Point, viewed from the Bay of Rest

It was an emphatic demonstration of communal resolve in favour of something positive, for the greater good.

The movement for Ningaloo spurred new protection for the reef, to bolster its health and to ensure we all had fish for the future – to catch, or just to ogle.

It paved the way for World Heritage listing and secured the relatively egalitarian experience of camping under the vivid Ningaloo sky to wake alongside its turquoise lagoons.

In the years since, Ningaloo has become an icon of the WA tourism industry; a boon for business and a job-generator for Exmouth and beyond. It's been a magnet for marine science investment and a beloved destination for Perth families and tourists from everywhere else.

But how many visitors to the North West Cape realise that the glowing orbs they now see on the northern horizon are flares from oil and gas rigs?

How many know that since the original campaign, conservationists have had to constantly fight off the threat of petroleum leases being granted on Ningaloo's doorstep and resist ever-closer incursions from seismic operations which would have unleashed salvos of deafening underwater noise in this wildlife hotspot?

Now there's a new proposal from a multinational player in the oil and gas industry. It threatens to strike even deeper into Ningaloo heartland, industrialising part of the wild Exmouth Gulf with a pipeline fabrication facility.



Humpback whale and calf, Exmouth Gulf (Photo: John Totterdell)

The Gulf is a genuine marvel of nature – a remarkable place bursting with Attenborough-esque wildlife moments.

Our reef and its adjacent gulf are like vital organs of the same body; mess with a lung here, or the heart there, and the overall consequences could be severe.

So a campaign is gathering once again to present an alternative, pragmatic pathway for this precious place. To protect the Gulf and the sustainable jobs and businesses it already supports, just as we defended Ningaloo Reef last time.

But there's a new dimension propelling the renewed surge to protect Ningaloo.

In the years since the original campaign, the science and our lived experience together have revealed just how depleted ocean ecosystems are becoming.



Mangrove Creeks, Exmouth Gulf (Photo: Andre Rerekura)

Given the sobering plight of the world's coral reefs, mangroves and fisheries, Ningaloo and Exmouth Gulf are beacons of hope.

These interlinked ecosystems are now rare examples of their kind. But to have any chance of weathering a challenging future, these fragile and priceless Ningaloo assets need to stay fighting fit. And to keep them that way, we need to relieve them of avoidable pressure – like the added stress of industrial development.

If we industrialise Exmouth Gulf, we fail the tests of science, conservation, and economics.

We devalue a highly productive asset, one of nature's last great factories, and we degrade the region's carefully cultivated marketing brand. All at our own peril. Which fails the pub test too.

Given all the good things Ningaloo's nursery gives us now and could provide in the future, it makes no sense to compromise it when this could be avoided.

Surely another dose of common sense for Ningaloo is due.

Paul Gamblin, director of the Protect Ningaloo campaign, was a leader of the original campaign for Ningaloo in the early 2000s and has been working internationally in ocean conservation in recent years.

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