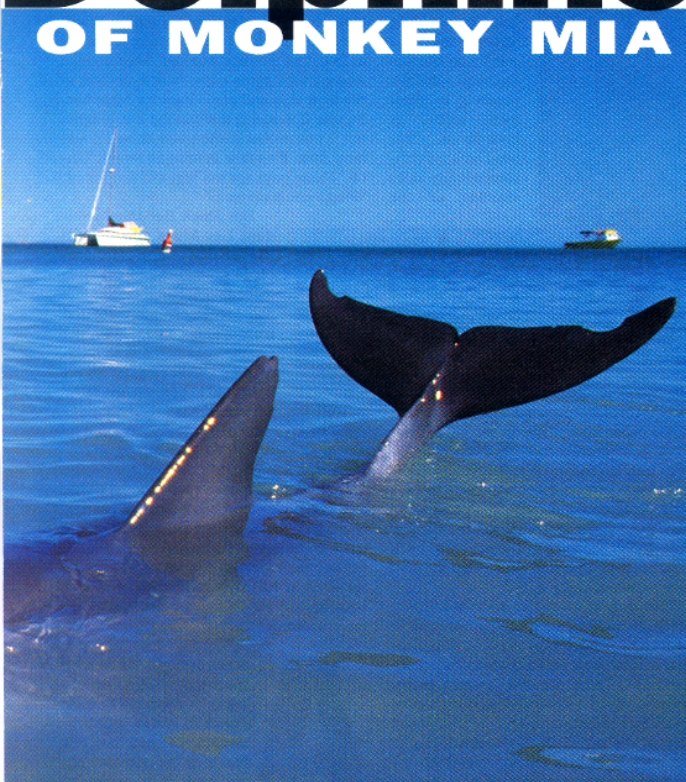
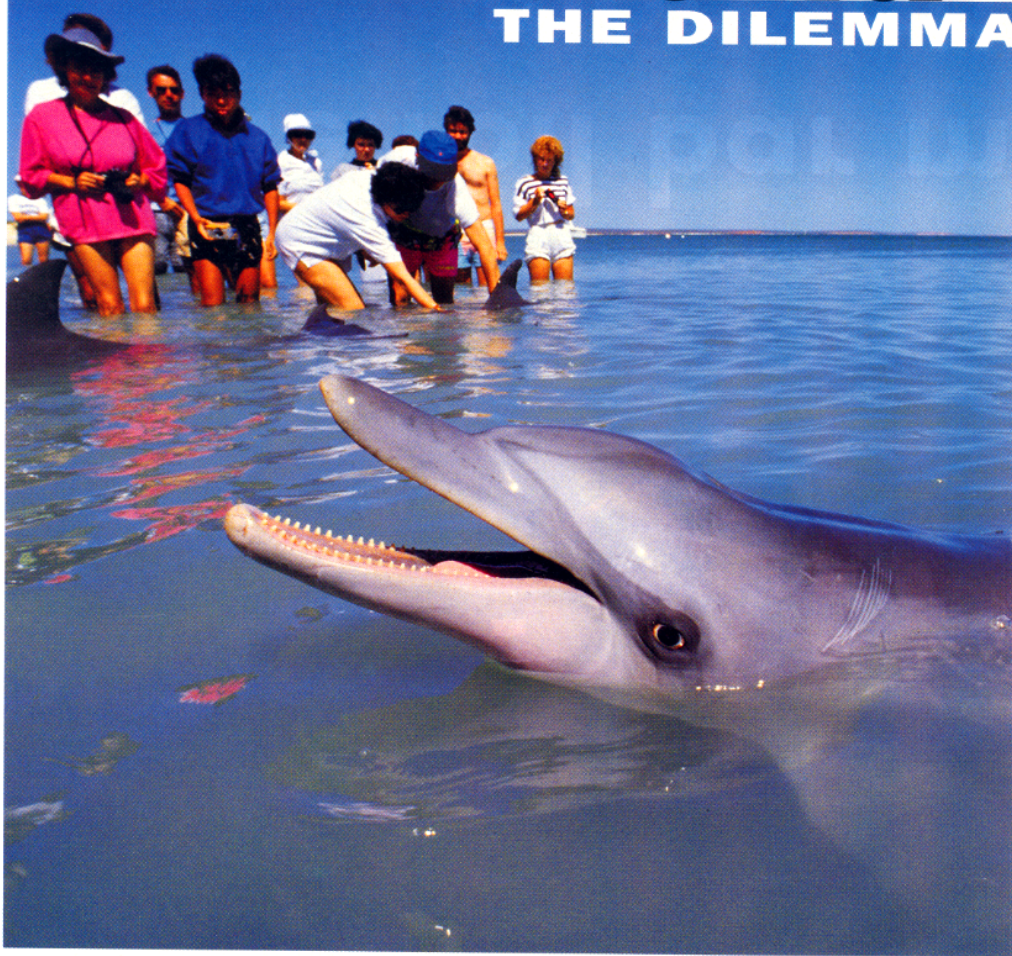


Dollars and Dolphins

THE DILEMMA OF MONKEY MIA



More than just a happy face: one of a dwindling number of Monkey Mia's drawcards. The area's 4ha resort (inset) is soon to expand.

DAVID DARE PAPER



Oil has been found on Western Australia's 500km Gascoyne coast but the State Government doesn't want to know. The region, a treasure-house of marine life, is the State's great hope for the next tourism boom.

By Steve Bunk

gas exploration in the Ningaloo park, where substantial oil deposits have been found, prompting complaints from the resources industry of political gamesmanship.

A 1993 government-funded report said that within 20 years, the North-West Cape on which Exmouth is located could cater for about 13,000 visitors at once, a carrying capacity that would put it in the same league as Bali, Phuket and Cairns. Only 12,000 people live in the 141,000sq km of the Gascoyne, which also extends inland, yet its tourism takings in 1993-94 totalled almost \$72 million. That year, the three shires of Shark Bay, Carnarvon and Exmouth had more than 265,000 visitors.

An eco-tourism strategy is being prepared for the Gascoyne but already the WA Tourism Commission has expressed support for a proposed \$400 million resort-town at Maud's Landing near Coral Bay on Ningaloo Reef. Subject to environmental approval, the 250ha Coral Coast Resort would eventually include a 400-room club resort, 250-room hotel and convention centre, chalets, townhouses, a caravan park and a backpackers' hostel. Houses and a golf

THE MOMENT HAS COME AT last for a twilight stroll along the beach at Monkey Mia. After marvelling for years at photos and footage of tourists petting wild dolphins, we've finally made the 900km trek north from

Perth to a trampled strip of sand on Shark Bay and are impatient to witness one of the

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world's most magical encounters between human and animal.

The beach is quiet, deserted in fact, as most visitors cook dinner in the caravans and chalets of this low-key resort 24km from Kenham, Australia's westernmost town. And here, as if to fulfill a promise, two undulating dorsal fins break the shallows parallel to shore.

This time, the dolphins stay just out of reach. But the next morning, the beguiling

nature of what we experience shows why Monkey Mia is a classic example of the challenges facing Western Australia from Denham to Exmouth, a 500km drive along arid coastline and marine splendour that has become the great hope for the State's next tourism boom. Known as the Gascoyne after the river flowing through the geographical and commercial centre at Carnarvon, this environmentally delicate coast embraces

World Heritage-listed Shark Bay at its southern end and Ningaloo Marine Park in the north. Ningaloo, a national treasure rivalling the Great Barrier Reef, harbours 500 species of fish including the famous whale sharks which, during their seasonal migration each year, are viewed by thousands of snorkellers and divers.

Premier Richard Court, who holds the

State's tourism portfolio, has identified Shark Bay's dolphins and Ningaloo's whale sharks as potential linchpins for an emerging industry of nature-based tourism. Accordingly, the State last year banned further oil and

course would be built along the primary dune facing the reef, which boasts 220 species of coral, some of which can be found within 10 metres of the shore. "It would be like your hub and spokes," says Terry McVeigh, director of policy, planning and development for the Tourism Commission. "There would be one major development and a lot of smaller ones around in the bush."

Conservation Council of WA co-ordinator Rachel Siewert doesn't see it that way. Labelling the proposal "huge and terrible", she likens it in scale to projects on Queensland's Gold Coast, and fears that it foreshadows an ad hoc, incremental approach to development. "If you have one Maud's Landing, what happens when the next one comes along, and the next?" she asks.

"That's what happened to Monkey Mia. It was just going to be a caravan park and now it's a great, big development and they want to get bigger."

The 4ha resort at Monkey Mia has received approval from the Shark Bay Shire Council to expand by another 8ha, and is awaiting State Government permission. The resort also wants a limitation on it of 550 overnight guests to be lifted to 1375. International tourists comprise about 30 per cent yearly. Many say they come to WA specifically to see the dolphins.

Of the 350 dolphins in the bay, a mere handful frequent the beach to be fed and to commune with people. Despite years of research, scientists still don't know why only those few do it. The matriarch of the group, thought to be more than 35 years old, was killed in July by a stingray. If the others suddenly went away, the \$7 million development at Monkey Mia would be threatened. Would tourists still visit Shark Bay for its other beauties?

"Probably not," says Dr Ross Dowling, an environmental scientist and academician who has studied the region more extensively than any other consultant. Nevertheless, a 1995 report he wrote notes that when Shark Bay was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1991, it was one of only 11 places among about 400 on the register which met all four natural criteria for listing.

This is largely due to its location on the 26th parallel, straddling the boundary of the northern tropical and southern temperate climatic zones, which makes the region habitable by plants and animals from both zones. It boasts one-tenth of the world's dugong population, along with migratory humpback whales and wading birds, turtle rookeries,



Dolphins are not the area's only asset. Among other potential tourist drawcards are the strange and prehistoric Hamlin Pool stromatolites (above), humpback whales, dugongs, a floating pearl farm, wreck diving, fishing, scenic cliffs and islands.

excellent recreational fishing, a floating pearl farm, wreck diving, abundant wildflowers, scenic cliffs and islands.

Much is already being done to help ensure that the area's non-dolphin blessings will draw tourists in their own right. A boardwalk has been built for environmentally safer viewing of the

run in the north-west, because they say without staying at Monkey Mia, their trip will not sell," says resort manager Dean Massie.

"Up until the last 12 months, the shire has fought us every inch of the way. It took 2½ years to get a liquor licence that goes from 6pm to 10pm. When this property first came in, they saw the fill, they saw the powerhouse, the ejector salination plant, sewerage, the motel units coming in – within four days the lawn was laid. We chartered a launch for three days, took everyone in town on sails and came back for huge barbecues. [I thought] this was the way to open but it was probably the worst thing I could have done. Everyone in town just went, 'Uhh. These guys are too big, too fast for us. What's going on here?'"

But Shark Bay shire president Les Moss agrees with Massie that community attitudes toward the resort have shifted. "It's based on the fact that Monkey Mia is there and it's not going to go away, the Government sees it as an international tourist destination, it's a third-rate one and has to become first-rate."

Retirees, who comprise roughly one-third of Denham's 500 residents, mostly would like to see little change but unemployment is high and other citizens hope for growth, Moss says. "The general thrust of tourism development from a community perspective is, we should improve what we've got rather than attract too much more development that will compete with existing services in Monkey Mia and Denham. Because, in reality, it's people that bugger up the environment."

ABOUT 100 PEOPLE ARE AT the beach each morning, many of them up to their knees in water, holding cameras or stretching out hands as the permanently smiling dolphins swim parallel to the lineup, shepherded by a ranger. The dolphins' skin is cool, clammy and tough, not really a thing to be stroked. Their blowholes constrict like toothless gums and the re-opening is accompanied by a sharp "Phew!", as if on completion of a small but daunting task. Rangers occasionally ask the audience to move back in the shallows and they respond quickly, made docile with awe, subdued by respect for this phenomenon.

"Old Charlie" was the first Shark Bay dolphin hand-fed from a boat by a fisherman's wife in 1964. Researchers now suspect that Old Charlie was really Old Charlotte and the current group coming into shore is related in a matriarchal line. To test that hypothesis, DNA sampling is being implemented. Throughout the eighties, male dolphins dominated the beachfront. But shortly

after a calf was found dead in January 1989, two more calves, three adult males and a female disappeared. The contingent of 11 beach-visiting dolphins was suddenly halved. Many causes were postulated by on-site researchers – among them the effects of transmittable human diseases and sewage that had been dumped untreated into the water before the new owners took over and renovated later in 1989 – but no firm conclusions were reached.

Last year, when the 16th of 21 calves born to the beach-frequenters since 1975 died, consultant Barry Wilson prepared a report which postulated that the animals were losing their social and hunting skills through too much contact with humans. In April this year, a \$4000 fine was introduced for feeding them from boats. Monitored by the rangers, visitors do not feed calves or males at the beach, offering fish only to females aged four or older. To protect the females' hunting skills, just a third of their daily diet is given, and feeding is no longer random throughout the day. Exact times are not announced, in hopes of avoiding a convergence of tour buses.

"The increase in visitation has been astronomical," says the Department of Conservation and Land Management's district manager, Ron Shepherd. "In 1982, something like 10,000 people came to Monkey Mia and by 1989 we had 115,000 ... Since about 1989, we've been continually asked, what is the carrying capacity, what is the ceiling?"

This year, a government-funded consultant's study concluded that the ecologically sustainable ceiling is about 700 people daily. But more than 1000 visitors have gone through the resort's gates in a single day, with up to 400 entering the water at once to form a human wall.

"It was fine for the dolphins, they just cruised up and down the edge of the wall," Shepherd says. "From an environmental perspective, I saw no problem having 1000 a day, but those people who were all in the water didn't get much of an experience."

"One of the biggest problems from a management perspective is that there is no comparison to Monkey Mia anywhere. This has been the longest successful interaction between humans and dolphins. All of the others have lasted a few years and ended up to the detriment of the animals."

Similarly, the Gascoyne's entire coastline can sustain only finite numbers. How many visitors are too many? "That's the \$64,000 question," says Kieran Kinsella, director of the Carnarvon-based Gascoyne Development Commission. "In most of the developments we've been looking at, we're saying each site has to consider individual carrying

capacity." He agrees with Dowling that the Government has not yet provided clear guidelines on this issue. His commission is now trying to draw up a development strategy for the Gascoyne but all such work is contingent upon policy-setting by the State Cabinet.

In late 1994, a five-strong parliamentary select committee was formed to help find answers. The members recently travelled to



Turquoise Bay (top), site of a proposed resort; Ningaloo Marine Park rivals the Great Barrier Reef in beauty.

a resort in a South African national park, then visited multiple-use mining and petroleum exploration sites in Israel. A report is due by the end of November.

Meanwhile, the State is progressing with plans to build a \$10 million boat harbour at Exmouth, the gateway to Ningaloo Reef. Residential, tourist, commercial, civic and cultural use of nearby land is being evaluated. Already, \$2 million has been spent on road improvements. Many residents expected an economic downturn after the US Navy abandoned a communications base at Exmouth in 1992, but it has not eventuated. Instead, a trust fund of \$13.5 million from the sale of former navy houses is going toward infrastructure.

Perth fishing magnate Michael Kailis has submitted an informal proposal to build a "low-impact" resort of chalets and a caravan park on Turquoise Bay, the jewel in the crown of the Cape Range National Park which extends along the western side of North-West Cape of Ningaloo Reef. Insiders say this plan has little chance of gaining the necessary excision of national park land,

but they do not discount the possibility of Kailis moving his suggested site away from the western side of the cape toward the new harbour in Exmouth Gulf.

Camping and fishing have long been popular along the Gascoyne coast. Newspaper proprietor and shire councillor Leonie Horack recently bought an eco-tourism site south of Exmouth, a sheep station bordering Ningaloo Reef. Horack, the most outspoken conservationist on the council, is adamant that visitors will be well-controlled.

"What we've been seeing in Exmouth for a long time is adventure travellers who want a wilderness experience, and we have to be very careful not to taint the product," says Horack. She moved to the area three decades ago and says, "I can see what a few people have managed to achieve in that time in denuding the coastline."

She recognises the paradox of an avowed conservationist running a tourist operation. "You've got to walk the knife edge, so I think you've got to take people to the site and watch what they do. We're just trying to buy time, so the resource can be sustained as long as possible."

She favours the proposal for a resort at Maud's Landing, which is south of her station, because the ecology of nearby Coral Bay has been compromised over recent decades by ad hoc development of residences, sewerage and power. "Sometimes you have to sacrifice something in the effort to save something else. If we can save the rest of the west coast, then I think there's probably room for some sort of development there."

The resort-town project is being promoted on the basis that it can help to cope with environmental stress caused by Coral Bay residents and visitors, but the WA Conservation Council's Siewert disagrees. "You already have an environmental disaster," she says. "What are you going to do, put another one there to correct the first one?"

Her submission to the Environmental Protection Authority concerning the resort-town says: "Lessons are slowly being learnt in the eastern States from gross developments on the coast such as is proposed here, yet Western Australia still appears to suffer from parochialism when it comes to assessing coastal development."

The chance remains to get it right in the west. While conservationists are wary of the potential sting behind politically correct platitudes about nature-based tourism, there does seem to be an increasing acknowledgement that preservation can yield profits. If the bottom line is the big "D", it must be made to stand for both dollars and dolphins. □