

Fascinations of the Coral Coast and Ningaloo Reef

Commentary By

Geoff Walker

Australia is sandwiched between two major reefs, to the east **"The Great Barrier Reef"** and to the West the Coral Coast and the **"Ningaloo Reef"**. Whilst the Ningaloo Reef is small in comparison to The Great Barrier Reef, both are as equally stunning in their natural beauty. The Ningaloo Reef with its pristine environment is famous for Whale Sharks, Manta Rays, Humpback Whales, Dugongs, Turtles, Potato Cod, and hundreds of other different fish species. The Ningaloo Reef, which forms part of the Marine Park, spans a distance of 260 km, from **Bundegi Reef**, near the town of **Exmouth**, to Amherst Point near **Coral Bay** in the south.

The marine and terrestrial property of the Ningaloo Coast, on the remote western coast of Australia, includes **Ningaloo Reef**, which is Australia's largest fringing reef, and it is one of the largest of its kind in the world.



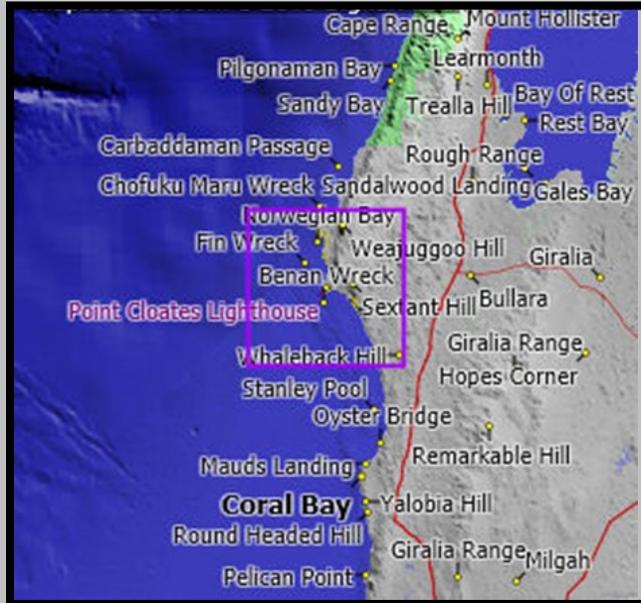
The blue shaded area on the West Australian coastal map indicates the 1200 km extent of the Coral Coast and the Ningaloo Reef. Although the Great Barrier Reef tends to gain most of the nation's focus, Australia's "other major reef" is no less spectacular, with its pristine condition supporting a diversity of rare marine species that contribute to the exceptional qualities of the marine and terrestrial site. The area is closed to most categories of commercial shipping.



The stark and striking contrast of the rugged, arid coastal planes, the sparkling crystal white beaches and the clear, dark blue and turquoise colors, of Ningaloo Reef.

Known for the number of Cyclones that sweep through the region every year, it stands to reason the Coral Coast has its share of shipwrecks. The Ningaloo Reef and Coral Coast have, since the early 17th century, been a route for trading vessels that have skirted along the coast of Western Australia, initially making landfall at Point Cloates, after a long passage across the Indian Ocean, before transiting further north to Exmouth peninsular and beyond.

As shown below, Point Cloates, was originally charted as an island and was only discovered to be



mainland Australia in 1819, by Phillip Parker King who charted the southern reaches of Exmouth Gulf. Point Cloates, formerly known as Cloate's Island, is a peninsula approximately 100 km south south-west of the North-West Cape, in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

Western Australia's rugged coastline is littered with more than 1,600 known shipwrecks, including Australia's oldest.

There follows, a random selection of a few of Western Australia's older and best-known shipwrecks located along the Coral Coast

Trial, 1622

The British ship Trial, Australia's oldest known shipwreck, struck a reef near the Montebello Islands in WA's north. Two separate parties of survivors took longboats to Batavia (Jakarta). The location of the Trial wreck remained a mystery until 1969 when it was found by underwater explorers.

Batavia, 1629

Carrying 322 crew and passengers, the 650ton Batavia is one of the most infamous and historically significant wrecks on the Australian coastline. Wrecked in 1629 on Morning Reef in the Wallabi group of the Abrolhos Islands, it is the second ever recorded shipwreck in Australian history with a gruesome story of survival, mutiny, and massacre, among the survivors of the wreck. With the women forced to act as concubines, whilst the weaker, unwilling, and sick were murdered.

The Dutch ship was on its way to Batavia (Jakarta) laden with gold and silver when it struck the reef off Geraldton. Most on board made it to shore. The commander and some crew took a longboat to Batavia for help but when they returned, they discovered a mutiny had taken place, with more than 100 of the survivors killed.

Of the 268 castaways marooned on the surrounding islands, less than 150 remained alive on September 17th, when Commander Fransico Pelseart returned on the ship the "**Sardam**". After being arrested the mutineers were tortured into confessing and eventually, all but two had their hands severed before

facing the gallows erected on Long Island. Two young mutineers Jan Pelgrom and Wouter Loos were shown mercy and marooned near the mouth of the Murchison River in Kalbarri.

Vergulde Draeck, 1656

The **Vergulde Draeck** was the first Dutch and English East India shipwreck found on WA's coast. Wrecked in 1656, it took until 1963 before local spear fishermen rediscovered it near **Ledge Point**, a small coastal township 105 km north of Perth. While 75 of the 193 people on board are believed to have made it to shore, searches from the township could not find them.

Zuytdorp, 1712

In 1711 Dutch ship **Zuytdorp** left the Netherlands bound for Batavia (Jakarta). It never arrived, and with no idea of where it was lost, there was no search. In 1927, coins and other items were found on a beach near Kalbarri along with signs that survivors had made it to shore. The wreck site was first explored in 1964.

Zeewijk, 1727

After being wrecked on the Abrolhos reefs near Geraldton, a small rescue group took the **Zeewijk's** longboat to get help but were never seen again. The remaining survivors used local timber and materials to build another boat, and with more than 80 survivors on board, sailed to Batavia (Jakarta).

Cervantes, 1844

The Cervantes was originally built as a whaling brig with one deck, it was copper fastened and had a coppered bottom. It was built in Bath, Maine, and registered in that port on 4 October 1836. The ship made its first voyage to WA in 1841, visiting Albany. During its second WA visit in 1844, it was extensively damaged during a storm while anchored at **Jurien Bay**. Whilst the crew were fishing a sudden gale blew up. Before the vessel could make sail and weather the gale out at sea in deep water, it was driven on to a sandbar. The crew managed to get ashore, and three of them were able to travel to Perth to report the loss. The Master, Sylvanus Gibson, and more crew also arrived in Perth soon after. He reported that one man had been left some 30 miles north of the Moore River, while another six crewmen had returned to the wreck site. Their intention was to use a boat from the Cervantes, in order to sail to Fremantle. Whilst it is reported that the Master, Captain Gibson, said that the vessel had sustained only minor damage, nevertheless the keel was discovered to be broken. Due to the distance from the wreck to nearest repair port where effective repairs could be carried out, it was decided to sell the vessel for salvage, as is, in situ.

The Ben Ledi, 1879

Commanded by Captain John Boyd with a crew of 22, the ship was on a passage from Sydney to Calcutta in ballast when it struck the east side of Pelsaert Island at 11 p.m. on the night of 16 December 1879. The **Ben Ledi** lies just offshore on the east side of Pelsaert Island about 7 km north of Wreck Point. This is also the site of the wreck of the Australian schooner **Marten in 1878**.

The wreck of the **Ben Ledi** is located about 150 m offshore on a shelving reef in 2–6 m of water, with much wreckage washed shoreward. Some frames and plating at the main site show above water. The bows have disintegrated, but sections of plating and frames, anchors, chain, windlass, deck, and mast

fittings, as well as ballast stone are visible to divers. The stern section with the rudder lies at the greatest depth. The inshore area contains a section of the ship's floor, some deck beams, and a section of bulwark.

Captain Boyd had taken a noon sight that day which he calculated to place the ship at latitude 30° 8' South and longitude 114° 15' East. From this position he estimated that the south end of **Pelsaert Island** bore NW magnetic, and about 70 miles away. The **Ben Ledi** was steered on a course N by E magnetic for four hours from the noon position, covering 24 miles. A further 16 miles on a more northerly course was covered up to 7 p.m. At that time Captain Boyd had estimated his position as being about 42 n miles from the coast and 19 n miles south-west of Pelsaert Island. He changed course to NW by W, which he judged would take him well clear of the Houtman Abrolhos. The wind was from the south-west and the sea smooth. Because of the smooth sea, Captain Boyd had made no allowance for leeway. He had no deviation card onboard and stated that, to the best of his knowledge, the compass aboard the **Ben Ledi** had not been swung and adjusted in the 4 years he had been in command.

After striking the reef the vessel was found to be making no water, but having hit at a speed of about 9 knots, it was well and truly fast on the shelving reef, the bow being in only 1.83m of water despite drawing 4 m. This gives an indication of the force with which the ship grounded. At daylight the crew went ashore, taking with them some sails to make tents, and some provisions. On the morning of 19 November, having failed to get his vessel off the reef, Captain Boyd, with five men, left for Geraldton in one of the ship's boats, to seek assistance.

A court of inquiry held at Geraldton on 8 January 1880 before Maitland Brown, Acting Principal Officer of Customs for Champion Bay, Lockier Burges, J.P. and John Craig, Master of the Rob Roy, acting as nautical assessor, cleared Captain Boyd from all blame over the loss of the **Ben Ledi** as it considered that adverse and unknown currents had taken the ship to the east of its estimated position. Captain Boyd stated his explanation for the wrecking as being either a strong current, or excessive mirage affecting his sextant sights of the sun. During the inquiry comment was made of the schooner **Marten** having been wrecked at the identical place, the previous year.

The **Ben Ledi** was sold by public auction held in Geraldton on 9 January 1880 for £80 to a consortium. As the vessel was in ballast, it is assumed salvage must have been limited mainly of ship's fittings.

Mayhill, 1895

She was a 4-masted Barque and reputed to be one of the fastest sailing vessels of her time. The framing and stringers were of iron with plating and beams of steel. There were two decks, the upper deck being wooden sheathed. The vessel was under charter to the White Star Line of Aberdeen, carrying 2,947 tons of railway line for the Mullewa to Cue railway at the time it was wrecked. This cargo was insured for £15,000. The **Mayhill** was valued at £24,000. The **Mayhill** had been built by A. Stephen & Sons at Dundee in Scotland in 1890 for George William Wood. He sold it to W. H. Myers & Sons, Liverpool, in 1893. The **Mayhill** sailed from Middlesborough, England, on 20 May 1895 for Geraldton. The vessel was under the command of Captain James Hume with 28 crew and one passenger.

On 10 August the ship was just north of Champion Bay amidst a full-blown gale and high seas. Captain Hume was attempting to sight two red leading lights, so he could enter and safely navigate the deep-water channel, which his 1881 copy of the Admiralty sailing directions stated were in place. Unknown to

him, these lights had been changed from red to white. The white lights were observed by Captain Hume, who ignored them because they did not conform with his sailing directions. When he found the vessel was approaching too close to the breakers, he attempted the starboard tack but found it would not enable the ship to clear the rocks, so he put the vessel about again. At about 6.30 a.m. the **Mayhill** struck the reef before it could come up into the wind. The vessel's bow rode up onto the reef while big seas broke over the stern. A distress signal was made when it was realized that the pumps could not cope with the ingress of seawater entering the vessel.

Captain Hume asked for assistance from another vessel, the **Lindus**, but the Master of that vessel refused to endanger his own ship. Captain Hume stated later that he was of the opinion, that he could have got the **Mayhill** off the reef with the aid of the **Lindus**, but as there was 1.8 m of water in the hold and the pumps were not keeping up with the ingress, his opinion seems to have been over optimistic. The **Mayhill** remained fast on the reef until it began to break up about fourteen months later.

Several attempts were made to rescue the crew and passengers, finally the 20ton Cutter "**Una**" was able get alongside to rescue all the crew and bring them ashore safely. An Admiralty Court of Enquiry was convened soon after the incident. Finally, the court found that Captain Hume was negligent, over issues mainly to do with not ensuring he had the updated charts of Geraldton and Admiralty Sailing Directions, and guilty of an error of judgement. As a consequence of the Court's findings, his Masters' Certificate was revoked for 3 months from the date of the stranding, but he was permitted to use his Chief Mate's certificate in the interim.

Lubra, 1898

The **Lubra** was built in Glasgow in the 1860s and belonged to the Adelaide Steamship Company when it was wrecked in **Jurien Bay** in early January. Since the mid-1880s the vessel had a regular run delivering passengers, cargo and mail between Geraldton and Fremantle.

Due to sustaining damage after departing Geraldton, the **Lubra** anchored in **Jurien Bay** to unload passengers and cargo and it was then decided to try to beach the vessel. In doing so, the steamship was actually stranded on a reef, just near the south leads into the bay and soon became a wreck.

Zvir, 1902

The **Zvir** was built by J. Priestman and Company in Sunderland in 1900 as a 2-deck (one steel, one part iron) screw steamer. The dimensions for the vessel were 100.58 x 14.16 x 7.72 m and gross tonnage was 3353.64. The steamship en route from Java to Melbourne with a cargo of sugar, ran aground two nautical miles north of Fraser Island in November 1902. The crew survived but the steamer soon sank. This wreck is visible in position 22° 36.55' S. 113° 37.56' E. The **Zvir**, was registered in Rijeka, Croatia, and was engaged in world-wide tramping services for the shipping company, 'Societe in Aziono Ungaro-Croata' on a voyage from Passaman (Java) to Port Adelaide, and Melbourne, when it was stranded and subsequently wrecked off Point Cloates, on 27 November 1902.

The **Zvir** was under charter to the Colonial Sugar Refining Company according to records. The ship initially grounded and extensive damage resulted in the vessel's total loss at the stranding location. With no lives lost, the crew left the wreck in the lifeboats, landed ashore and walked into Carnarvon. Two weeks later, reportedly, the vessel was in the same position intact, but heavily heeling over to starboard. The main deck rails and upper deck being awash. Loss of cargo was valued at £50 000, with swells

continually breaking over decks, nothing could be saved owing to the prevailing bad weather. Salvage and recovery vessels were unable to get alongside. All crew were rescued. At the beginning of June 1903, the Harbor Authority of Rijeka undertook an investigation into the conduct of Captain Ivan Randic and senior officers, including Martin Sica-Susak, on duty when the grounding occurred. Outcomes of this investigation have not been published.

SS Mildura, 1907

SS Mildura was a 2217ton steel steamer built in Glasgow in 1901. The ship was engaged in the lucrative livestock and cattle trade from ports in North-West Australia's Cambridge Gulf.

The ship was lost in Lighthouse Bay near Exmouth. The **SS Mildura** was travelling from Cambridge Gulf to Fremantle with a cargo of live cattle in June 1907, when it hit shallow reef at the top of North - West Cape. The steamship was wrecked, but the crew were saved by the **SS Burrumbeet** without any loss of human life, however, very few of the cattle survived the ordeal.

Salvaged timbers and iron from the Mildura were used in renovations at the Yardie Station homestead. The almost intact hull sat on the reef until WW2 when it was used for bombing practice and was extensively depleted above sea level, as a consequence of aerial target practice.



(Unknown)

The remains of the **SS Mildura**, now a permanent fixture, off North-West Cape

SS Fin, 1924

The small Norwegian whaler "**Fin**" was wrecked in January 1923 by a devastating cyclone which drove it onto Fraser Island. The island has since disappeared leaving only the wreck and a lighthouse tower which once showed the way into Norwegian Bay. Position 22° 38.93' S. 113° 37.6' E.

Chofuku Maru, 1931

On 5 February 1931 after running on to a reef described as being about 3–4 miles north of the North - West Whaling Station, the 7939ton **SS Shunsei Maru** owned by Tomamohosaji Kisen Kaisha of Kobe, Japan, sent out distress signals. These radio signals were answered by the 4498ton **SS Chofuku Maru** owned by Kawasaki Kisen Kaisha, also of Kobe, Japan. Both ships were carrying a cargo of bagged wheat to Japan.

On reaching the coast the **Chofuku Maru** initially mistook another wreck, which was aground at Fraser Island, for the **Shunsei Maru** and headed in towards it before anchoring offshore. A strong southerly wind caused the anchors to drag, and the ship struck a reef with its stern, damaging a single propeller

blade. On realizing that the **Shunsei Maru** lay further north the ship moved up the coast despite the vibration caused by the damaged propellor.

Though safely anchored outside the reef in deep water, the anchor chain caught on a ledge or reef and the cable parted. Another anchor was deployed, but it was also lost, and the ship drifted onto the reef in prevailing strong south-westerly winds.

An attempt was made to lower a lifeboat and it too was lost. For a while the two ships remained on the reef less than a mile apart, both salvable until a fire broke out on the **Chofuku Maru** causing its complete abandonment. Both vessels lay aground on a reef off **Port Cloates**, only a short distance from each other.

The **Shunsei Maru** was eventually successfully refloated and anchored nearby, because of exhaustion of salvage crew (3 days without any sleep), and ship under its own power made Carnarvon Harbor, and whilst alongside jetty, parted her moorings and was blown off the jetty in a gale, and had to stand clear of jetty and anchor. Eventually the weather abated and temporarily repairs were made to the ship's bottom; she then sailed for Surabaya. Leaving the burned-out hulk of the **Chofuku Maru** in her stranded position.



The ill-fated **SS Chofuku Maru** seen with a heavy list to Port at the point of her stranding.

(<http://museum.wa.gov.au>)

Alkimos, 1964

Alkimos was a Greek-owned merchant ship which was wrecked on the Coral Coast north of Perth, Western Australia in 1963. The Alkimos was built in just 23 days in Baltimore, in the United States for the U.S War Shipping Administration, in 1943. In 1944 a murder suicide took place on the vessel and a female radio operator was shot dead. Following the war, the ship changed hands several times, and in 1953 the then Norwegian owners who had named the vessel **Viggo Hansteen** sold it to Greek interests who renamed the ship "**Alkimos**". In 1963 the **Alkimos** continued her run of bad luck when she ran aground south of Geraldton and from that point on the vessel was destined to never leave Western Australian waters. What followed was a series of mishaps, groundings, and misfortunes to whoever came into contact with the ship. The ship had acquired a reputation of being jinxed. This was her 2nd

grounding, the first occurred in 1952, when on a voyage from London, via Panama, to Port Chalmers and Wellington with a cargo of British manufactured motor cars, and bagged cement. She ran aground two miles northeast of the Katiki Point Lighthouse near Moeraki, in New Zealand. Luckily the vessel was only slightly damaged, was quickly refloated, and was able to make port.

The ship's woes continued when on a voyage from Jakarta to Bunbury she struck a reef on the 19 March 1963 near Beagle Island off the Western Australian coast. It was salvaged and towed to Fremantle, Western Australia, where it underwent repairs for two months.

After the settlement of a dispute over payment for the repairs, **Alkimos** left Fremantle under tow by an ocean-going tug, **Pacific Reserve** from Hong Kong. Only a few hours out of port, on 31 May 1963, the tow line parted and **Alkimos** was driven ashore. Although the ship remained intact, it could not be refloated at that time, and so it was filled with water to secure it in place and left in the charge of an on-board skeleton crew.

Later, another tug, **Pacific Star**, returned in January 1964 and the ship was refloated on 14 February, but the planned journey to Manila had hardly begun when the tug was seized a week later at sea by authorities, and **Alkimos** was left at anchor. On 2 May, the vessel's anchor chain parted, resulting in her being driven onto the Eglinton Rocks near present-day Yancheep, in Western Australia. On this occasion the ship was more severely damaged, and all thought of salvaging it intact was abandoned.

It was later sold by the owners for scrap. However, in 1969, salvage workers were driven off the wreck by a fire, and each time they returned, the fire reignited. After that time, the partly dismantled remains of the ship were abandoned and left sitting in several meters of water before gradually disintegrating. The jinx obviously followed the vessel to her demise.

South Tomi, 2004

The **South Tomi** was made infamous after one of the longest pursuits in the Royal Australian Navy's history. Originally observed illegally fishing in Australian waters, the **South Tomi** was pursued by the RAN for over 6,000 km where it was finally boarded and confiscated 300 miles from the South African coast and brought back to Fremantle. The catch worth over 1 million dollars was sold by the Government and the vessel turned over to the city of Geraldton.

Intentionally scuttled in 2004, with the view to becoming a dive attraction, the 60 m long fishing vessel sits in 25 m of water, 3 miles from the Batavia Coast Marina. The site is exposed to the swell. Unfortunately, since the disbanding of the Geraldton Artificial Reef Committee, the wreck no longer has a buoy or moorings attached and the wreck sits unmarked, roughly 200 m east of the South Tomi Isolated danger marker, used by commercial shipping.

End

References and Research: Museum of wa.gov.au. Various online data available in the public domain from which some information has been sources, Shipwrecks of the Ningaloo Reef, Shipwrecks of Western Australia.

Note: This is "A Not for Profit" document. Unless otherwise specified, images are from various unknown sources on the Public Domain and used under the Fair Use category for review, commentary, and educational purposes only. Photographs of unknown origin –owners of these images should make themselves known by contacting me via this website and I will be pleased to give due accreditation. No infringement of copyright intended