

# Protecting the Houtman Abrolhos Islands



Department of **Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions**

Department of **Primary Industries and Regional Development**



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*Cover images*

**Top** Pelsaert Island. *Photo – Samille Mitchell*

**Inset top left** Basile coral farm. *Photo – DPIRD*

**Inset top right** Australian sea lions. *Photo – Emily Ward/DBCA*

**Inset below left** Crested terns. *Photo – Chris Surman/Halfmoon Biosciences*

**Inset below right** Baldchin groper. *Photo – DPIRD*

**Above** Lesser noddies. *Photo – Chris Surman/Halfmoon Biosciences*

## Why so special?

The Houtman Abrolhos Islands are a mosaic of 210 islands surrounded by an aquamarine sea and colourful reef. They support one of the largest seabird breeding areas, are a haven for endangered shorebirds and migratory waders and are home to reptile and bird species found nowhere else on earth. The majority of the islands are national park managed by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA).

The surrounding waters support an unusual coexistence of tropical and temperate species with magnificent coral gardens, fish, anemones and seagrass meadows. Special areas called Reef Observation Areas have been set aside for the conservation and observation of marine life and habitats. They sit within a Fish Habitat Protection Area (FHPA) managed by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD).

Steeped in maritime history, archaeological sites at the Abrolhos are under the jurisdiction of the Western Australian Museum (WA Museum).

You can help to care for this unique archipelago. Watch the [Abrolhos island protection video](#) and observe the following advice to allow future generations to enjoy the same experience.



**Above** Stay a minimum of 10 metres away from sea lions when on land.

## Caring for breeding seabirds

The Abrolhos Islands form the largest and most species rich seabird breeding area along the Western Australian coast. Different species breed at different times and most islands in the archipelago are seabird breeding sites at some time during the year. Enjoy birdwatching from a distance with binoculars.

To protect seabirds and allow them to successfully breed, please keep:

- at least 50 metres from any seabird congregations. Backtrack and move away if birds fly off. Disturbed birds will abandon their nests which can be fatal to eggs and chicks if exposed to:
  - hot or cold weather.
  - predators.
- loud noises and sudden movements to a minimum near seabird colonies.
- to existing tracks and to the water's edge to avoid collapsing the nests of burrowing birds.
- well clear of mangrove trees as it is the only place in Australia where the threatened Lesser Noddy breeds.
- the use of external lights to a minimum on vessels at night and draw curtains to shield internal light. Bright lights at night can startle and affect bird flight patterns causing injury or death.

Do not:

- touch eggs, chicks, nests or nesting birds.
- kite surf or set up adjacent to seabird colonies.
- use jet skis, jet boats or drones close to islands where seabirds are present.



**Above** Lesser noddies. *Photo – Chris Surman/Halfmoon Biosciences*

## Caring for migratory shorebirds

The Abrolhos Islands is a 'stopover' for critically endangered migratory birds that fly up to 13,000km to Western Australia each year from as far away as Russia. It's imperative to their survival that they feed and rest in order to 'fuel up' for the return flight. Constantly taking flight when disturbed reduces their ability to build up energy reserves.

Observe these amazing birds from a distance and keep away from tidal flats, tidal ponds and salt lakes where birds are present.

## Experiencing wildlife – “look, don’t touch”

Native wildlife is protected by law and should not be disturbed in any way. The Abrolhos are home to a variety of other wildlife including tammar wallabies and the Australian sea lion, one of the rarest species of pinnipeds in the world.

- Do not disturb sea lions. Stay at least 10 metres away when on land.
- Always give sea lions resting on land a clear, unobstructed escape route to the sea.
- Do not feed any wildlife as this can be harmful to the animals and a disease risk for humans.
- Leave all wildlife, including live or dead shells, fossils and corals where you find it. Collecting of any kind can impact the health of the islands' ecosystems.
- When snorkeling or diving, take care not to touch or disturb coral or any other marine wildlife.
- Do not approach an injured animal. Gather information on the severity, location, date and type of injury including photos and contact DBCA.



**Above** Report any new weed infestations such as *Verbesina*.

## Don't bring unwanted guests!

Introduced species can cause extinctions on islands and are the single greatest threat to island environments. There is no way of knowing which introduced species might survive and breed and what damage they might do. So, the best way to protect the Arolhos is to prevent bringing any unwanted guests with you.

Before travelling to the Arolhos:

- Install and maintain rodent bait stations on your boat.
- Ensure your vessel is free of any freeloaders like geckoes, insects and spiders as well as ant, wasp or bee nests.
- Check your footwear, clothing and bags. Remove any soil and seeds to avoid accidentally introducing new weeds or soil diseases.
- Pack your food in clean, sealed, plastic or metal containers rather than cardboard boxes that can harbour pests like cockroaches and mice.
- Leave your dog and other pets at home. Pets are not permitted on the islands. Diseases and parasites such as ticks can be transferred to native animals.

When at the Arolhos:

- Don't discard seeds from fruit and vegetables on the islands.
- Report any new infestations such as weeds (*Verbesina*, *Boxthorn*) or rodents to DBCA.



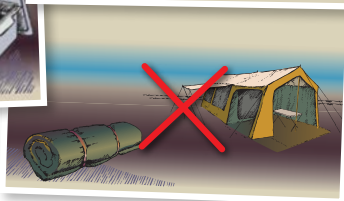
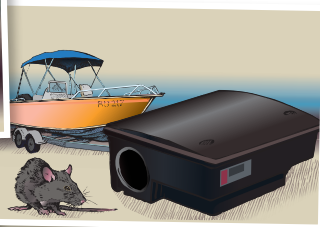


**Above** Check your footwear and remove any seeds or soil to prevent introducing new weeds or soil borne diseases.

## Reduce human impact on the islands

To assist with conservation efforts:

- The master of any boat must submit a **'notification of travel'** form prior to entering the Abrolhos FHPA. This assists in effective management and records important contact details in the event of an emergency.
- Live onboard your boat. Camping and campfires are not permitted on the islands.
- Do not bring firearms. Firearms are not permitted.
- Bag all rubbish and take it with you when you leave.
- Use only portable or chemical toilets where toilets are not provided.





**Above** Be respectful of commercial fishers' and aquaculture operators' property and privacy. *Photo – Samille Mitchell*

## Minimise boat impacts

Help conserve marine habitats and:

- Use public moorings where available to avoid the use of anchors and chains, which can damage coral reefs and seagrass beds.
- When moorings are not available, anchor in areas of sand and mud bottom only.
- Know your vessel's draught and your limits in the shallows. Use current charts and navigational aids, to prevent impact and propeller damage to reefs.
- Take care to ensure fishing gear such as rock lobster pots are not placed on top of fragile coral reef, which takes a long time to recover from damage.
- Keep the waters clean. The Australian Marine Safety Authority prohibits the emptying of vessel sullage tanks within the FHPA.
- Do not dispose of any waste in the waters of the FHPA. Disposal of non-biodegradable and biodegradable garbage (except for waste from fish cleaning) is prohibited and must be retained onboard for appropriate disposal on the mainland.
- To help keep the FHPA free of marine pests, please keep your vessel's hull, propeller, shafts, keels, water intakes and outlets clean of excessive biofouling in accordance with **DPIRD's CLEAN vessel policy**.



**Above** Be aware of seasonal fishing closures for species such as WA dhufish. *Photo – Ann Storrie*

## Fish responsibly and ‘fish for the future’

The FHPA is located within the West Coast Bioregion.

- Please check the most recent **recreational fishing guide rules** for the fish species you intend to catch in the FHPA.
- Know and keep to recreational fishing bag, size and possession limits. Stop fishing once you reach your bag limit.
- There are seasonal closures in place to conserve demersal scalefish in the FHPA. Please check the most recent recreational fishing guide rules for annual closed season times.
- Be aware of the boundaries and fishing restrictions that apply within the Reef Observation Areas.
- Care for your catch. Return undersized and other protected fish to the water quickly and with care.
- You must have a release weight onboard when fishing for demersal scalefish. Please use it when releasing demersal scalefish to the water to help to reduce the effects of barotrauma.
- Low impact ‘catch to cook’ fishing is encouraged during your trip to the FHPA.
- Discarding retained fish for a larger one is known as ‘high-grading’. High-grading is illegal and results in exceeding your bag limit.
- Catch and release fishing is strongly discouraged, particularly for demersal scalefish, as post-release mortality rates are high.
- Do not feed fish. Observe the fish of the Abrolhos without disturbing their feeding patterns.
- Dispose of offal and waste from fish cleaning away from anchorage areas and popular swimming, snorkeling, or diving locations, as this can attract sharks to the area.
- Report any sightings of illegal fishing, fish kills or aquatic pests and diseases to **FishWatch 1800 815 507**.





**Above** Take care when diving and observe the reef without impact.  
*Photo – DPIRD*

## Dive safely and without damage

Take care when diving and:

- always fly the dive flag so it is easily visible to others.
- always dive with a buddy and never dive alone.
- know your own ability and don't take unnecessary risks.
- do not anchor dive tenders and vessels in coral.

Observe the reef without impact and please:

- don't rest or stand on corals and other fragile marine life.
- control your buoyancy and secure loose dive equipment to prevent contact and damage to corals and marine life.
- be aware of your fins to avoid breaking coral and stirring-up sediment from careless kicks.
- leave shells, reef fish and animals where you find them.
- do not anchor on historic shipwreck sites or remove any artefacts.

## Respect other users

Outside the national park, the majority of the Abrolhos Reserve is leased to commercial fishing and aquaculture operators. Activities associated with these industries occur year-round at the Abrolhos.

Please be considerate and respect commercial fishers' and aquaculture operators' property and privacy.

- Do not enter areas of leased land, or use private jetties or commercial moorings.
- Do not take close-up photos of fishing camps. These are people's homes.
- Be aware of commercial activities and sites. Avoid contact with pots, lines and aquaculture leases.
- Report any equipment damage to DPIRD.
- Remove fishhooks from ropes if they become entangled or mark entangled ropes or floats to avoid creating a safety hazard.
- Avoid diving near fishing and aquaculture equipment.



**Above** WA Museum and University of WA archaeologists recording the Batavia (1629) survivor camp structure on West Wallabi Island.  
*Photo – WA Museum*

## Protecting historic sites and artefacts

The Abrolhos Islands have a rich cultural heritage and history. Shipwrecks found here are part of Western Australia's heritage and protected by Commonwealth and State law. The Batavia wreck site and associated survivor sites are a National Heritage Listed Place.

- Please enjoy visiting historic sites and leave them as you find them.
- Disturbance, damage and removal of artefacts from historic shipwrecks and sites is prohibited.
- Anchoring on historic shipwreck sites is prohibited. Moor or anchor away to avoid damage.
- Metal detectors are not permitted.
- Report the discovery of wrecks or artefacts to the WA Museum – see contact details below.
- Terrestrial historic sites include guano mining and fishing camps – do not damage or disturb coral rubble walls or other historic and archaeological features.

## Contact Details

### Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions

#### Parks and Wildlife Service

201 Foreshore Drive  
Geraldton WA 6530  
Tel: 08 9964 0901

[exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au](https://exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au)

### Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development

#### Geraldton District Office

20 Gregory Street,  
Geraldton WA 6530  
Tel: 9956 8555

[fish.wa.gov.au](https://fish.wa.gov.au)

### Western Australian Museum

Tel: 1300 134 081  
Email: [reception@museum.wa.gov.au](mailto:reception@museum.wa.gov.au)

[museum.wa.gov.au](https://museum.wa.gov.au)



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could save  
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[emergencyplus.com.au](https://emergencyplus.com.au)

Download the free Emergency+ app before your visit. Use the app in an emergency to call for assistance. If there is no mobile phone coverage you **WILL NOT** be able to call **000** but the app will provide you with your GPS location.

Check for alerts and updates directly related to parks and major trails at [alerts.dbca.wa.gov.au](https://alerts.dbca.wa.gov.au) and for all emergency information in Western Australia at [emergency.wa.gov.au](https://emergency.wa.gov.au).

Find more park visitor information, book campsites and share your experiences at [exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au](https://exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au).

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