

Environment

Much-loved author Tim Winton introduces us to Ningaloo, the awe-inspiring piece of Australia he holds closest to his heart.

Into the WILD

WORDS *by* SAMANTHA TRENOWETH

Environment

The water was deep, dark, indigo. It was Tim Winton's first trip to Ningaloo and he was on a boat, out beyond the reef. Suddenly the skipper called, "Timmy, get your mask and snorkel on," which he did in such a hurry, he says, "that I jumped in wearing my undies. I couldn't see a thing because it was such deep water, and then out of the gloom came these dots. The dots grew bigger and bigger, until I could see this huge spotted creature swimming towards me. It was a massive whale shark, and I swam with it for half an hour ... That was my introduction to Ningaloo and I just about lost my mind."

Considered the finest Australian novelist of his generation, Tim Winton is rarely lost for words but

Right: Tim was moved to be at the archaeological dig with Hazel. Below: Hazel is passing on her knowledge of Country to a new generation. Opposite page: Tim diving on the Reef.

when faced with the magnificence of this remote stretch of West Australian coast, where red earth meets turquoise sea, he is often silently awestruck.

He revisited his encounter with the whale shark for a documentary, *Ningaloo Nyinggulu*, which screens on the ABC in May. This time, with a scientific permit and clad in a wetsuit, Tim approached the immense creature and gently brushed tiny parasites from around its mouth. That moment in the film is alive with suspense and a sense of mutual trust: the shark trusting Tim to perform such an intimate act, and Tim trusting the shark not to fling him away with the sweep of a massive fin.

After 30 years visiting and defending Ningaloo, Tim had signed on with a crew of documentary filmmakers, back

"Sadly," says Tim, "that was white-anted by commercial interests, and the gulf and parts of the peninsula were taken out of the World Heritage Area, which was a tragedy." He describes the gulf as "the nursery for Ningaloo", where water is filtered, dugong breed and whales nurture their young. To protect the reef, the gulf and environments surrounding it must also be safe.

Tim Winton's connection with the ocean "goes so far back," he says, "that I can't remember not being in love with it ... The world is beautiful, but the world in the water is particularly beautiful – joy and wonder."

Tim has shared that love with his three children, Jesse, Harry and Alice, who have all visited Ningaloo. "I haven't

had the luxury of putting the grandkids in the water here yet," he says, "but when they see their first turtle, their first whale – I just can't wait."

Yet, in making the documentary, it wasn't swimming with humpbacks or turtles, or watching an orca surf the bow wave of his boat that affected Tim most. It was the time he spent with the traditional owners of Ningaloo (Nyinggulu in the language of the Baiyungu people).

"The most moving day, for me, was being present at the first archaeological dig on this land in a whole generation," he tells *The Weekly*. The documentary crew had brought an archaeologist to excavate a midden site at a gathering place called Winderabandi. Hazel Walgar, a Baiyungu woman, approached the rock shelter with tears in her eyes, calling out the names of her ancestors.

"I felt privileged to be there," says Tim. "That was the biggest gathering of Traditional Owners in maybe two generations. To see how generous they were and how important it was for them ... I was standing beside Hazel when she cried her heart out."

The dig proved beyond doubt that First Nations people were living on

in 2019, to share its beauty and vulnerability. "It's been a labour of love," he says. And that's evident. The three-part series is both spellbindingly beautiful and moving, as it quietly puts the case for greater protection.

Twelve years ago Tim was among those who successfully campaigned for Ningaloo's UNESCO World Heritage listing, "and it's been terrific," he says, "but there's still unfinished business."

Best known for its pristine reef, Ningaloo is really three entwined ecosystems: Ningaloo Reef, Cape Range and Exmouth Gulf. When the World Heritage Area was first proposed, UNESCO and international scientists agreed on an "optimal boundary", which included the gulf.



"Nature, if you're prepared to go to it, will provide you with miracles, with wonders."

– Tim Winton





“There’s no place in the world like Ningaloo and we have to look after it.”

– Hazel Walgar



PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIOLETA J. BROSI/BLUE MEDIA EXMOUTH.

Country here at the time of colonisation, which validated the stories Hazel had heard from her old people, even though early pastoralists had insisted the land was empty and theirs for the taking.

“That day,” Hazel tells *The Weekly*, “I had mixed emotions. Tears of joy and tears of sadness. We all went back to that place and walked in [our old people’s] footsteps. Having that opportunity to go there, to sit down and to gather evidence to show that they had once been there – there was joy in that.”

“Their history here goes back so far it’s almost impossible for us to imagine,” Tim adds. “They were here for 40,000 years and kept it in good nick.”

Which is why both Tim and Hazel are thankful that, since a 2019 Native Title ruling, much of the land has been jointly managed by Traditional Owner rangers and WA Parks and Wildlife. It’s providing an opportunity, Hazel says, to bring young people back on Country with a real sense of purpose, after generations during which the West Thalanyji and Baiyungu people were forced off this land. Hazel and her sisters were taken to a mission when she was six years old, but it didn’t sever their connection to this place. Now she is passing her knowledge of Country, culture and language on to a new generation.

“There’s no place in the world like Ningaloo,” she adds, “and we have to look after it, like our old people did. We have to protect it. Country is for healing. Country needs people and people need Country.”

Tim also believes Country heals the soul. “Wild places feed our imagination, they give us perspective about how important we think we are,” he says. “They set you back in your place a bit.”

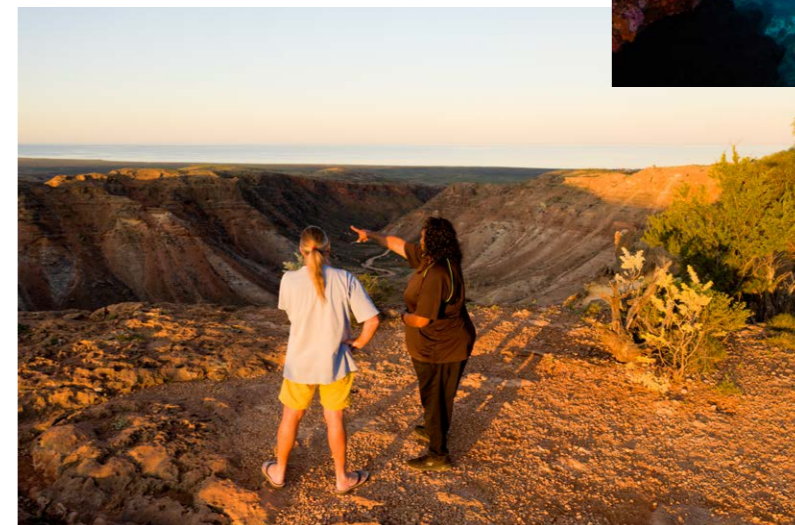
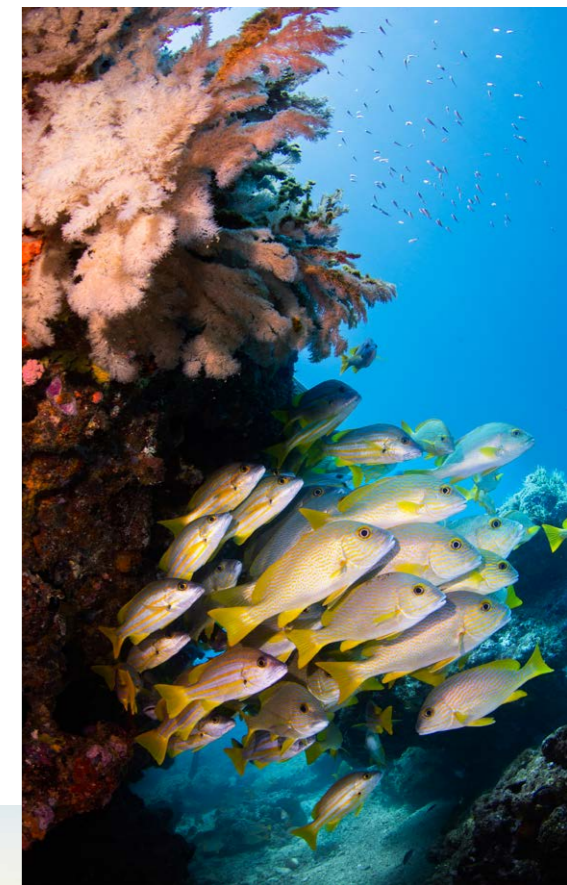
“Also, the natural world is an effective antidote to depression, and a resource we don’t avail ourselves of enough. I know it’s the case for me. At my lowest, it’s not always therapy that pulls you out of a hole, it’s the natural world. It’s

Environment

immersing yourself in something bigger.

“This is our only home. To feel connected to that and feel there’s something sacred about that, I think it’s really important. Nature, if you’re prepared to go to it, will provide you with miracles, with wonders, with moments of grace. People go to Ningaloo to experience the rarest thing, and that’s contact with wild nature.”

However, over the 30 years he’s been visiting and defending Ningaloo, Tim has watched the lights of oil rigs out to sea creep closer, with all their threats of spills and seismic testing and the immense contribution of the oil and gas industries to climate change. “Just recently,” Tim explains, “dead dolphins were found in an oil slick, and this seismic testing is going on in a humpback whale highway, very close to some of the biggest whale nurseries in the world.”



Above: Ningaloo is famous for the pristine reef and abundant sea life it sustains. Left: Tim and Hazel at Charles Knife Canyon. Opposite: Tim with a whale shark.

concerned. Thanks to community pressure, and with the support of Hazel and the Traditional Owners, the WA government is planning a

Ningaloo exists today, he says, as a place of precious biological diversity because ordinary people stood up, but that work’s not over. The greatest danger to Ningaloo is climate change.

“I want to be a good ancestor,” Tim says. “The most conservative scientific projections indicate we need immediate action to save our grandchildren’s future. I don’t want my children’s children to look back at us, and think, you all knew what was going on and did nothing.”

But Tim is an optimist at his core, particularly where humanity is

marine park in Exmouth Gulf – not yet a World Heritage extension but a significant step along the way.

“Community groups helped save the Franklin, Kakadu, Ningaloo,” Tim adds. He hopes *Ningaloo Nyinggulu* might inspire Australians to stand up for the planet, for wild places and for their grandchildren once again. **AWW**

For more, visit protectningaloo.org.au and follow @protectningaloo on Facebook/Instagram. *Ningaloo Nyinggulu* screens on ABC and ABC iView from Tuesday May 16.