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*Coral Bay, a popular tourism attraction inside the Ningaloo Coast World Heritage Area.
(Photo: Michael Hughes)*

MICHAEL HUGHES, TOD JONES & IAN PHAU

Understanding World Heritage from the local perspective on the Ningaloo Coast, Western Australia

The remote Ningaloo Coast region, the location of Australia's largest fringing coral reef, was designated as World Heritage in 2011 because of its outstanding natural values.

In the past, World Heritage nomination traditionally involved a select group of officials from government, conservation experts and local authorities who sourced and provided scientific evidence to determine whether World Heritage should be granted to nominated areas or sites.

More recently, UNESCO deemed that local community involvement was a required part of the process, in addition

to the expert contributions, representing a move toward participatory governance. The change in process could potentially influence World Heritage designation outcomes. Understanding how local communities experience the nomination process provides insights into the consequences of community involvement in World Heritage decision making.

With this in mind, we set out to understand how the community experienced the World Heritage nomination process for the Ningaloo Coast, an ecologically significant Australian remote marine coastal region.

Methods and results

After reviewing a large amount of published documentation on the Ningaloo Coast nomination, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 18 key local community representatives, four key government representatives and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre director three months after the Ningaloo Coast received official designation as Australia's 19th World Heritage Area.

Interviews were semi structured, meaning that they were discussions around a series of key points we wanted to gather information about. The main points related to perceptions of the negative and positive aspects of World heritage listing and the associated nomination process for the Ningaloo Coast region. We took detailed notes during the interviews and all interviews covered the same main points to ensure consistency.

We found that while there was support for the Ningaloo Coast receiving World Heritage status the nomination process was seen as controversial. This was because community involvement was dominated by:

- Local political and social concerns such as access to local resources and local economic development;
- Community mistrust in the government officials and UN representatives managing the process,



*The Ningaloo Coast World Heritage Area, Western Australia.
(Photo: Michael Hughes)*



A passing Whale Shark on the Ningaloo Coast, one reason for world heritage listing. (Photo: Flickr)

FIGURE 1 Ningaloo Coast location and World Heritage Area Boundary

- Misinformation spread by some locals against the nomination that was taken as fact by some locals; and
- Local community perceptions that the process was unfair.

These community concerns were a result of negative experiences with past and current government actions and decision making in the Ningaloo Coast region regarding a range of other unrelated issues associated with protected areas and conservation management.

Conclusions and recommendations

Our research documented in detail how community involvement in a World Heritage nomination process for a significant marine and coastal protected area was heavily influenced by a tangle of other past and current marine and coastal protected area management processes and decisions in the region. Such entanglements are common at potential World Heritage sites and can significantly complicate the well intentioned requirement for participatory governance.

Our research shows that participatory governance is not something that can be applied by government to a specific decision making process in isolation. In order to be effective, participatory governance should be adopted as a general

approach for all management and decisions that impact on local community interests in a region.

It also indicates that effective community engagement strongly relies on the ability of facilitators to communicate in a way that resonates with local community understandings of politics, power and decision making processes.

Established mistrust in governments and their decision making presents a significant hurdle that might require involvement of a neutral third party such as a consultant or nonpartisan NGO to engage with the community. ■

More information
 Contact Michael Hughes,
 E: m.hughes@murdoch.edu.au

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Reference

1 Hughes, M. & Jones, T. & Phua, I. (2016). Local community perceptions of the World Heritage nomination process for the Ningaloo Coast region of Western Australia. *Coastal Management*, 44(2), 139–155.



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