

The Waterhouse Club of the SA Museum
Expedition to Rowley Shoals aboard *True North*

(The photobook associated with this report can be found [here](#))

7 – 12 September 2023

Leader's Report

Conception and Planning

In 2019, following several successful WHC expeditions aboard *True North* led by Ant Simpson, most recently in October and November of 2018 to Cenderawasih Bay in West Papua to intimately study whale sharks, it was decided to mount another expedition – this time to the Sepik River area of PNG and the island of Bougainville. The expedition was to run in November 2021 over 11 nights, also led by Ant.

The Covid-19 pandemic ruined these plans as *True North* ran a severely curtailed program in 2020 and was prevented from operating internationally when she returned to full service in 2021.

Eventually the plan transitioned to True North's Rowley Shoals, or "Coral Atoll", voyage from Broome over 5 nights in September 2023.

It would be led by Ant Simpson, and expedition scientist would be Steve Donnellan.

Mark Mussared became assistant leader in 2023 ("Bosun"), and ran the final administrative details, including the final payments from members and to True North.

The Expedition

In July 2023, two months before departure, expeditioners met for a pre-trip gathering at the home of Ant and Mary Lou Simpson, where in addition to becoming acquainted with other were provided with a briefing on the planned science and social programs by Steve Donnellan and Mark Mussared.

In September 2023 excited expeditioners converged on Broome in different ways from many directions in the days before embarkation, but all had arrived by Wednesday 6 September and were accommodated at various locations in the town in time for a Cable Beach sunset.

On Thursday 7 September collection time for embarkation was 4pm, so members had most of the day to navigate the Broome transport system and explore the town's delights. Many members met up at the wonderful Broome Museum with exhibits of early development of the town, pearling history and WW2 air raids, as well as the interesting dinosaur palaeontology. Others discovered the many pearl jewellery shops, the dinosaur footprints at Cape Gantheaume and the brewery, but all enjoyed a pre-departure lunch at one of Broome's delightful establishments.

After collection by coach at around 4pm, we were all at a beach facing Broome's Roebuck Bay removing our shoes before stepping into *True North's* tenders for a short ride to the ship anchored just offshore. By 5:30 pm we had been welcomed aboard, weighed anchor, cleared Cape Gantheaume, and were steaming west into a magnificent sunset towards Rowley Shoals, about 170 nautical miles over the horizon, with sundowners in hand.

By dawn after a calm overnight passage we had arrived at Rowley Shoals, and were quietly holding position just off Clerke Reef.

Rowley Shoals is a group of three coral atolls with magnificent, untouched coral gardens. Imperieuse Reef, Clerke Reef and Mermaid Reef lie roughly 25 miles apart in a line parallel with the coast and roughly 170 miles from it in 230m to 440m of water at the edge of the continental shelf. They were formed as coral built up on three seamounts as sea levels rose after recent ice ages, and are now contained in the Rowley Shoals Marine Park and Mermaid Reef Marine Park. Water temperature of 26C and underwater visibility averaging 40m make it one of the most brilliant diving and snorkelling locations in the world.

Clerke Reef, the central reef, has a large, sheltered central lagoon. Mid-morning, at slack water on the high tide, True North was skilfully maneuvered through the narrow channel into the lagoon and dropped anchor. This was to be our home for the next four wonderful days.

Across those next four days we marvelled at the huge variety of corals, fish, mollusc and other invertebrates, some of which are unique to Australia, as well as sharks, rays and turtles. We were out in the tenders at least twice per day, snorkelling, scuba diving, or fishing in the deep waters outside the lagoon beyond the boundary of the Rowley Shoals Marine Park.

The snorkelling was superb, with everyone commenting that the variety of life was better than anywhere on the Great Barrier Reef and more colourful. Likewise, those who scuba dived remarked that the underwater topography was fascinating with valleys, caves and drop offs. The range, diversity and health of the corals was spectacular.

Two of our younger expeditioners chose to free dive and would frequently join the scuba divers at depths of 10 to 15m for some very interesting interaction and photographs.

The fishing was hugely exciting. The most thrilling action was with sailfish, a smaller cousin to marlin. They would generally leap when caught and would fight strongly before eventually being brought alongside for release. The other main species was wahoo, which again fought strongly but had to be brought in very quickly or the line would suddenly go slack as the hooked fish was munched in half by an unseen shark.

Aboard, the True North service and cuisine was simply superb. Delicious food was served at every meal in sensibly sized portions, the wine list had something of quality for everyone, and the options of beers, aperitifs and cocktails for sundowners was vast. The crew were very accommodating, and were particularly patient and helpful with those who were unfamiliar with snorkelling or who had not had a scuba dive for some years.

When too much snorkelling, diving, fishing, imbibing and relaxing were barely enough, Steve Donnellan would fill the spare time with another appropriately topical and amusing scientific talk, such as *"How do Mermaids Reproduce and do they have Sex?"* His talks always attracted interested crew members as well.

Some of the key highlights of the expedition were:

- A late afternoon excursion in the tenders to Bedwell Island, a sand cay within the lagoon, for a beach party with the ship's crew, complete with ice cold drinks and delicious morsels of fresh crab.
- A very fast drift snorkel along a narrow channel from the lagoon out to the reef edge as the tide rushed out. Effortless – no finning required!
- Oscars' Night - an extravaganza on the final night. Everyone dressed formal above and informal below (eg bow tie and board shorts) and were photographed entering on the red carpet. Steve Donnellan then announced the nominations for the Oscar in each of numerous natural history

categories (eg Strangest Bone) before the winner in each was decided by a vote of the Academy (the well-dressed expeditioners). Many of the crew were terrific in facilitating Oscars' Night and then gleefully joined in the revelry.

(Winner of the Oscar for Strangest Bone was the baculum, or penis bone, of the walrus. Look it up...)

Summary

After the false start of the originally planned Sepik voyage, the replacement expedition to the Rowley Shoals was an unbridled success, thoroughly enjoyed by all expeditioners, to visit one of the best coral reef environments in the country. The True North Crew commented that it was a pleasure for them too, to have a group of like-minded, scientifically-oriented people on board who were there for the primary purpose of observing the natural environment rather than just the hedonistic delights of the ship, but who knew how to have fun too.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people, without whose support and assistance the expedition could not and would not have happened.

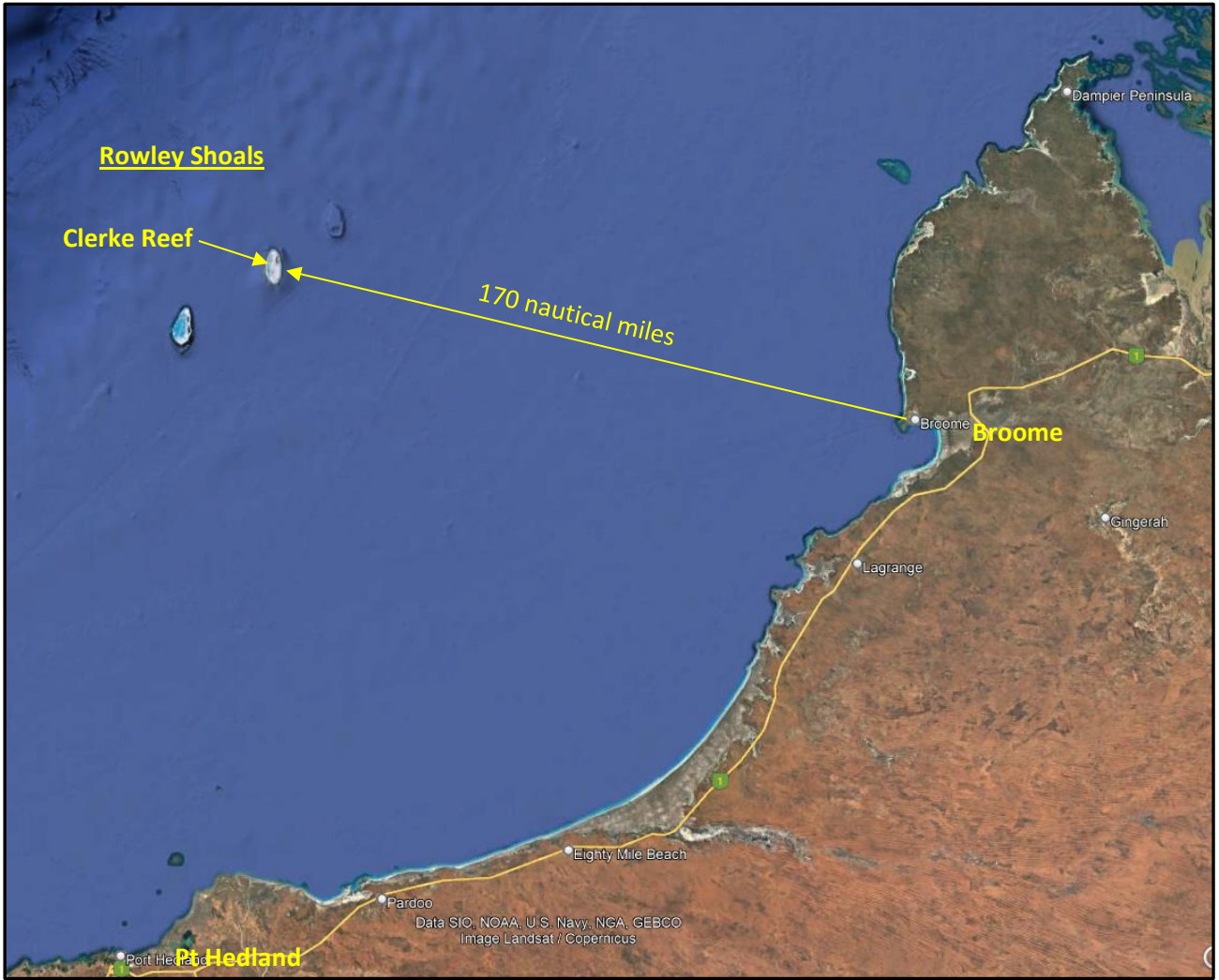
- **Ant Simpson**, who initiated True North expeditions some years ago, and whose idea it was to run another.
- **Steve Donnellan**, whose enthusiasm, knowledge, ideas, flexibility, wit and humour are inspirational, and the very stuff of WHC expeditions.
- **Natalie Rollinson**, whose work behind the scenes during the planning phase ensures the success of every WHC expedition and event.
- **The True North crew and office staff**, for their professionalism, kindness and support which made the voyage so memorable, and for their commercial support of WHC expeditions over many years.
- **All Expeditioners** for sticking with the program despite the covid setbacks, relishing the expedition when it did finally occur, and for continuing to support the WHC and its aims.
- **Caroline Mussared**, for putting up with my foibles during my involvement in the latter months, and supporting the whole enterprise from within.

Mark Mussared, Assistant Expedition Leader (Bosun), on behalf of

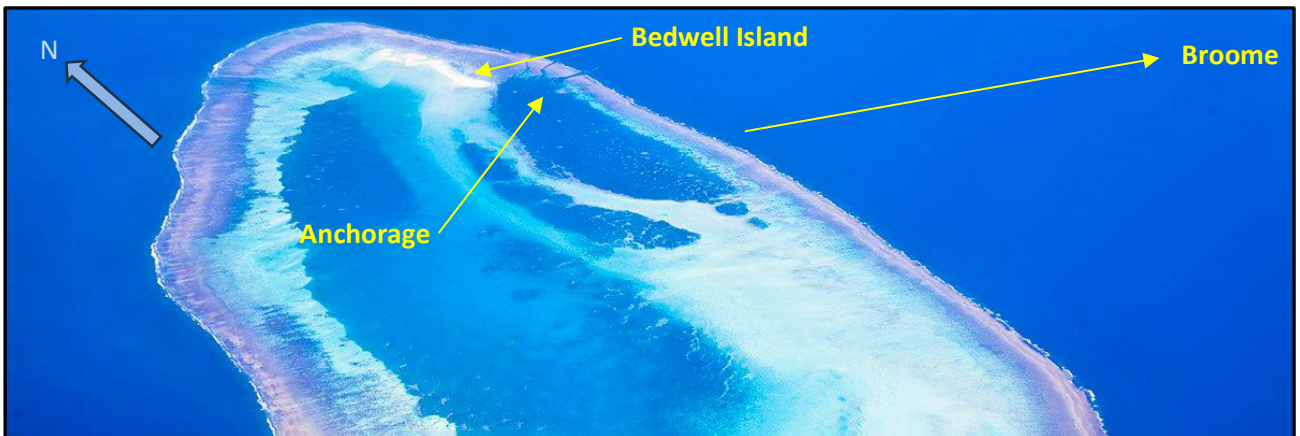
Ant Simpson, Expedition Leader

January 2024

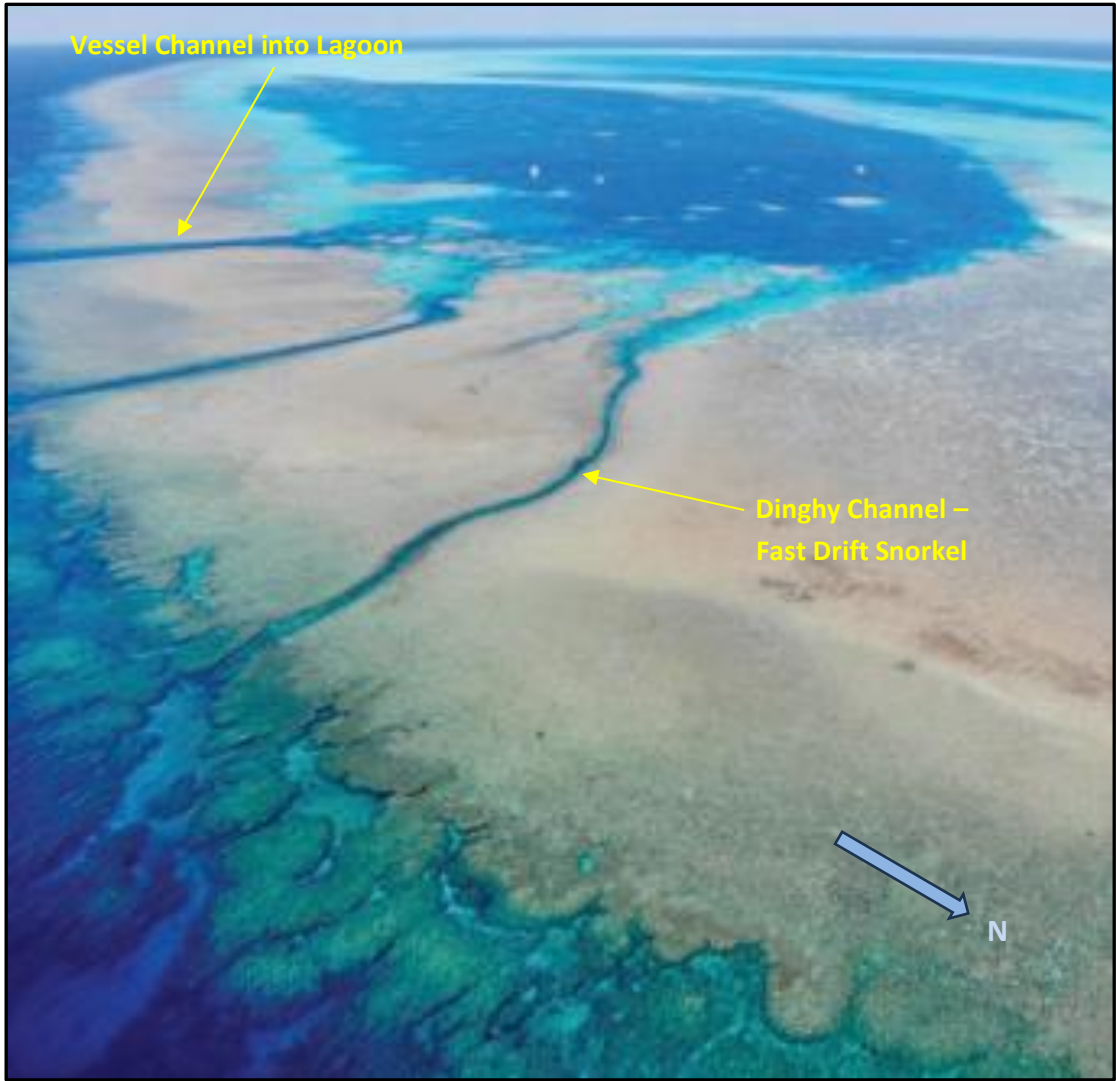




Location of Rowley Shoals



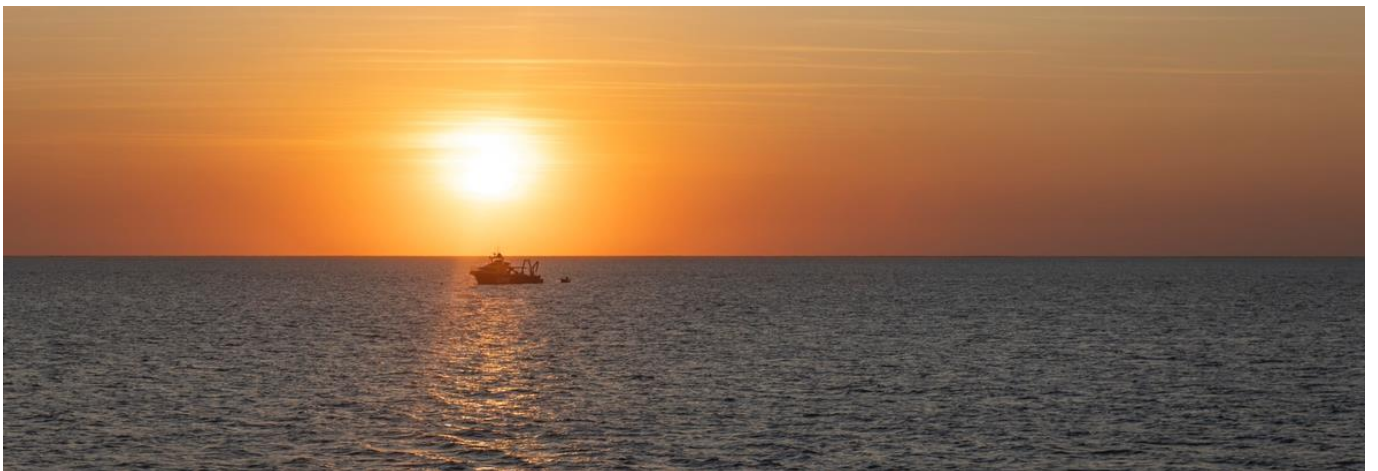
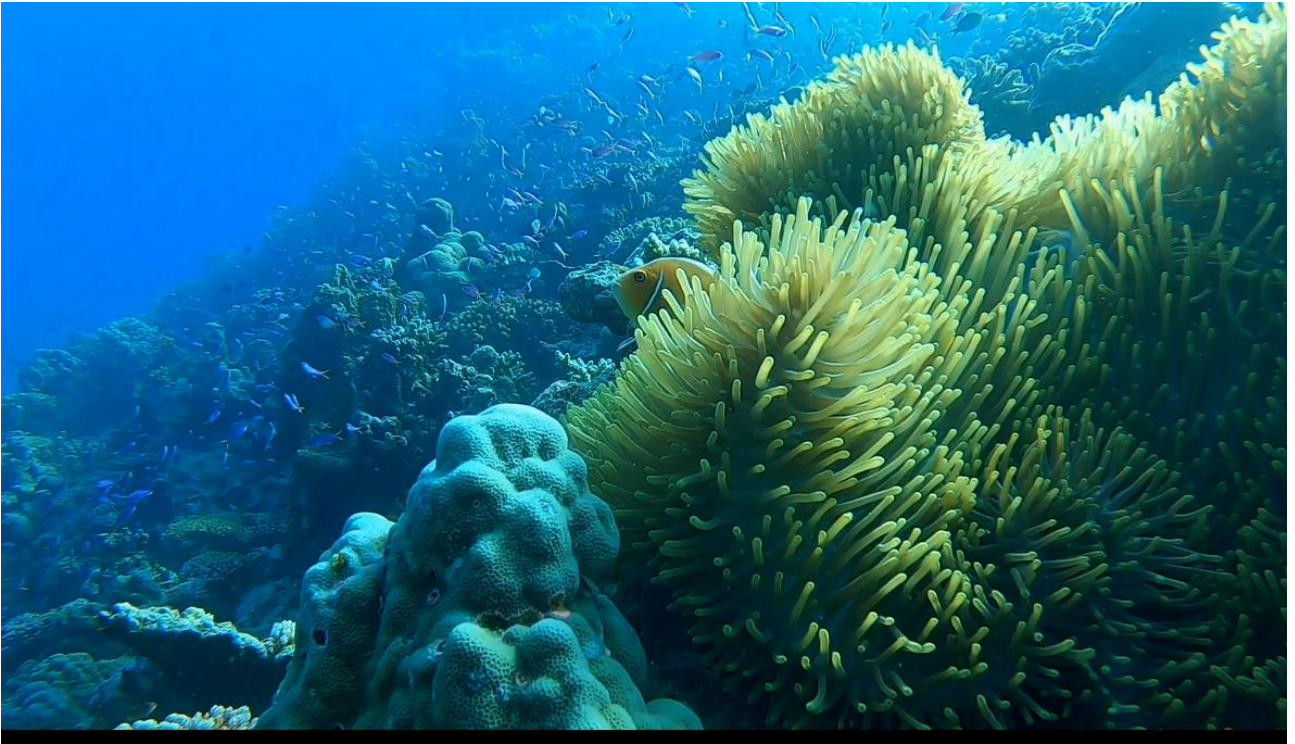
Clerke Reef from the SW



Channels Into Clerke Reef Lagoon, from the NE



True North Entering the Lagoon





The Leadership Team

