

François Péron

Francois Peron National Park was named in honour of the naturalist who made some of the earliest recordings of Shark Bay's inhabitants and wildlife.

François Péron was born in 1775 at Cerilly, France. He was the eldest son of a poor village family and at 4 years of age he contracted small pox which left him permanently blind in one eye.

Péron had a thirst for natural history and spent a number of years studying in a monastery. Later he enlisted as a soldier in the Napoleonic wars where he was severely wounded and taken prisoner.

In 1800, Péron heard of the plan for a French expedition to the Great South Land and was determined to be a scientist on that journey. With some luck he achieved a position as pupil zoologist on the Baudin expeditions. In late 1800, Captain Baudin led the expedition in the mother ship *Geographe* and was accompanied by Captain Hamelin in the *Naturaliste*.



François Péron (1775-1810)

In July 1801, Baudin arrived in Shark Bay and undertook extensive surveys on Bernier Island. Péron was able to collect many specimens and made interesting and informative observations during the short time spent in Shark Bay. Péron documented his observations in great detail. His writings have great importance in the history of natural science in Western Australia.

On Baudin's return voyage along the Western Australian coast in 1803, the *Geographe* anchored offshore from Cape Lesueur on 19th March. On hearing reports that Aborigines were seen on the mainland, Péron organised an ambitious walking expedition to cross the peninsula from the west to the east coast and to return. Péron was accompanied by Petit, an artist and Guichenault, a gardener.

After crossing in the morning the three men took a swim in the shallows of the east coast in the proximity of Herald Bight. While swimming they noticed Aborigines on the sand dunes along the beach. The three men made an attempt to communicate, but the Aborigines fled as the Europeans approached.

At times Péron was so involved when exploring that he became lost and returned exhausted and dehydrated. This occurred on Bernier Island in 1801 and again when returning to the meeting point on his venture across Peron Peninsula. Péron begged Baudin to allow him to rest before making his report because he "*could hardly talk and remain standing*". Unimpressed, Baudin wrote in his journal that night: "*this is the third escapade of this nature that our learned naturalist has been on, but it will be the last, for he shall not go ashore again unless I myself am in the same boat*".

Péron's incredible focus on scientific exploration throughout the three years of the expedition – "*impelled by my zeal, and the pleasure I had in the important discoveries I was making*" – often led him to disregard Baudin's orders. This was no doubt the catalyst for ongoing friction between the two men throughout the expedition.

When the *Geographe* returned to France in 1804, François Péron had become the leading scientist on the expedition. Of the 23 scientists who embarked on the expedition, only three returned to France. Péron was the only zoologist to complete the trip and to him fell the task of writing up the zoological results. His work was illustrated by Charles Lesueur who had joined the expedition as a gunner. Many of the 100 000 animal specimens that were taken back to France on the *Geographe* had been collected in Shark Bay. Péron's writing established him as the father of anthropology and his comments on evolution pre-dated those of Charles Darwin. He achieved fame amongst scientists in France but was not recognised outside his country. In his later years, he was a consultant to Napoleon and he became a friend and adviser to the Empress of France.

Unfortunately, Péron contracted many ailments during the expedition, including tuberculosis. He died only six years after the return of the voyage. Many of the voyage's manuscripts were not complete but were finished by his ship-board colleague Louis de Freycinet (who later commanded the *Uranie* on another scientific expedition to the region). Péron was only 35 years of age when he died and although his life was short, he contributed significantly to many fields of science including marine biology, anthropology, oceanography and ecology.