

## History of Bernier and Dorre Islands

Bernier and Dorre Islands are today recognised as Australia's most important refuge for endangered mammals, but the islands have a chequered history marked by periods of scientific study, carelessness and tragedy.

Rising sea levels and wave erosion some 8 000 years ago left Bernier and Dorre Islands separated from the mainland and inaccessible for Aboriginal occupation. Dirk Hartog's voyage in 1616 represents the first known landing on the islands and in 1696 William de Vlamingh surveyed and named Dorre Island from the Dutch words 'Dor' meaning dry or barren and 'Eyland' meaning island.

William Dampier's expedition to Shark Bay in 1699 included a brief account of Dorre Island's natural history and a collection of botanical samples. The islands were not visited again until 1801 during the French scientific expedition on board the *Geographe*. Bernier Island was named after the expedition's astronomer, Pierre Francois Bernier. The French noted the islands to be desolate, inhospitable and lacking in water. Explorer George Grey also encountered hardships in 1839 when his attempts to establish a permanent depot on Bernier Island failed.



William Dampier  
(by Thomas Murray c1698)

In 1860, the pioneer Julius Brockman camped on Dorre Island and his diary gives a graphic account of fire on the island – '*The island was high with spinifex, which had never been burnt .... There were thousands of wallaby. The wind was blowing a gale from the south and when I lighted a fire to camp, it swept the island bare for twenty two miles*'. Later he noted – '*I walked about the island, which was now bare as a sand patch and what were not burnt of the animals would have no food except seaweed until rain fell again*'. Further devastating fires were reported on Dorre Island in 1908 and 1973 and the widespread destruction led to concerns for the survival of the island's banded hare-wallabies.

The islands were leased for pastoral use in 1864, but it was not until the turn of the century that Mr G Baston grazed sheep on Bernier Island. He built a house, but his pastoral attempt was eventually abandoned. Further grazing leases were granted but never put into practice. Sandalwood cutters operated on Bernier Island in 1896 and the same year, JT Tunney, from the WA Museum, studied and took specimens of the island's mammals.

### The Lock Hospitals

In 1907, the Western Australian government established the Lock Hospitals on the islands for the segregation and cure of Aborigines suffering from diseases. Patients were brought from all over the Northwest, with females occupying the hospital on Bernier Island (Mr Baston's old homestead) and males accommodating the hospital at White Beach on Dorre Island.

A government report noted that '*The patients are allowed to live in their own natural way as far as possible, game is at present plentiful and hunting and fishing are the principal occupations of those who are fit to do it*'. Noted anthropologist Daisy Bates described the hospitals in 1910: '*there is not, among all my sad sojourn amongst the last sad people of the primitive Australian race, a memory one-half so tragic and harrowing, or a name that conjures up such a deplorable picture of misery and horror unalleviated, as these two grim and barren islands off the West Australian coast that for a period, mercifully brief, were the tombs of the living dead*'. By 1918, the Lock Hospitals were closed and the few remaining patients moved to hospitals on the mainland. Over nine years of operation, in excess of 700 Aborigines were admitted to the Lock Hospitals, of which at least 162 died on the islands.



Aboriginal men on Bernier Island 1910  
(Image courtesy Battye Library)

### A future as a conservation reserve

Conservation values of Bernier and Dorre Islands were recognised as early as 1907, when the Natural History Society of Western Australia requested that the islands be set apart as reserves for flora and fauna. This proposal was not agreed to by Cabinet. Three later requests to the Lands Department for prohibiting cats and firearms to protect the island's native fauna were also denied.

Goats left behind on Bernier Island from the pastoral and Lock Hospital eras flourished and by the 1950's had devastated the island's vegetation. A 20 year goat eradication program eventually removed the goats but they had already caused severe soil erosion and created extensive mobile sand dunes.

In 1957, Bernier and Dorre Islands were finally gazetted 'A' class nature reserves for the conservation of fauna. Four of the five species of endangered mammals on Bernier and Dorre occur nowhere else, yet only 60 - 70 years ago, mainland Australia supported widespread populations of all five species. These animals are nominated values of the Shark Bay World Heritage Area and protection of the islands' habitat is crucial.



Lock Hospital ruins - Dorre Island 2008