

Zuytdorp Shipwreck

The *Zuytdorp* ("South Land") was a Dutch East India Company merchant ship travelling to Batavia (Jakarta, Indonesia) in 1712. On board were about 200 passengers and crew, and a rich cargo, including 248,000 silver coins.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, spices and other trade goods of the East Indies were a much sought after resource by European and American merchants. The many Dutch ships that travelled to the Indies in search of these treasures followed a route via the Atlantic Ocean to Africa's southern tip at the Cape of Good Hope. From there most of the early vessels travelled directly north-east towards the Indies. However in 1611, seafarers found that by heading east from the Cape, they were driven by strong westerly winds which made for a faster voyage and resulted in fewer deaths on board. The problem with this new route lay in deciding when to alter course to head north and as a result many East Indies bound vessels found themselves in difficulties along the shores of Western Australia.



*A model of the Zuytdorp built by Jim de Heer.
Image courtesy of the Western Australian Museum.*

How did the shipwreck occur?

The precise circumstances of how the ship became wrecked in June 1712 remains a mystery, because no survivors reached Batavia to tell the tale. It is almost certain though that the ship's captain mistimed the vessel's turn north towards Batavia and abruptly encountered the rugged Western Australian coastline. It is likely that the *Zuytdorp* struck reef virtually without warning, probably at night, as the anchors were stowed away. Although 33 metres long and as tall as a three-storey building, the three-masted *Zuytdorp* would have been helpless once against the cliffs.

Did anyone survive?

Further clues to the shipwreck mystery and the fate of the crew lie in the artefacts from the seabed and nearby shore. The wreck came to rest close enough to the coastal reef platform for some passengers and crew to bridge the gap to apparent safety. Evidence shows that survivors lit huge fires in the hope of attracting salvation from passing vessels or searching ships. Their hopes were in vain. They were likely to have stayed near the wreck for as long as possible because Dutch captains of this era were commanded to sight the coast at 27 degrees south, which is almost the exact latitude of the wreck.

The survivors were almost certainly helped by local Aboriginal people and this contact with Europeans was probably the first ever made by Australia's indigenous people.

When was the wreck discovered?

The wreck of the *Zuytdorp* was discovered in 1927 between Tamala and Murchison House pastoral stations by workers who were fencing and trapping dingoes at the time. One of the station workers was the late Tom Pepper Senior. In 1954, a geologist exploring for petroleum, Phillip Playford, met Pepper and after examining artefacts found at the site, returned to Perth and identified from the coins that the wreck was the *Zuytdorp*.

Coins and other artifacts found at water soaks some distance inland led to speculation that some survivors may have joined an Aboriginal group. Water is scarce in the area other than in winter, so without the help of local Aborigines the Dutch survivors would probably have died with the onset of the hot summer. Researchers are investigating the possibility of a genetic link between *Zuytdorp* survivors and local Aborigines.

In 1992, 59 000 hectares of land surrounding the wreck was declared the Zuytdorp Nature Reserve. The reserve includes the majority of the permanent and seasonal soaks that the stranded Dutch would have had to rely on to survive.

Access to the reserve and wreck site is both hazardous and restricted. The wreck and surrounding land is a protected zone and permission is required from the WA Maritime Museum to enter this area. Permission is also required by land managers to undertake an expedition into the area. Diving on the wreck is prohibited for safety reasons and to protect historic relics.