The Ningaloo Reef and Cape Range Peninsular have an ancient and enduring association with the Aboriginal people of the North West Cape in Western Australia, dating back to over 30,000 years ago. The region remains of immense cultural importance to the identity and spirituality of the traditional owners and their descendants. The Cape Range Peninsular is also of extreme archaeological significance for understanding Australia’s early human settlement, yielding some of the earliest dated evidence for the specialised use of marine environments.

The word ‘Ningaloo’ is aboriginal in origin, with various meanings in different dialects. In Yinikurtira* West Thalanyji* Junigudira*, ‘Ningaloo’ means ‘deep water’. In other language groups however, it denotes a promontory of high land that extends into the sea. (The Yinikurtira country is sometimes described as being West Thalanyji*Talanji*Junigudura* depending on the academic).

The North West Cape and Cape Range Peninsular was inhabited by the people known as Yinikurtira. The late Sydney Dale was the last of the original old people from the North West Cape Area, recognised as a Yinikurtira and a Thalanyji man. Sydney Dale was born on Giralia Station and spent most of his youth at Cardabia Pastoral Lease. Sydney Dale was given custodianship for his Grandmothers country, which starts from above Tent Island on the eastern side of the Exmouth Gulf and extends across to Bulbarli Point on the west coast of Ningaloo, in the early 1950s. This brought great responsibility which he actioned to the end of his life by establishing relationships that would enforce his wishes and Legacy. Sydney Dale kept his word to his old people to never change the truth, to make sure that the old was never written over or changed, ‘To always do as the old people said’ (Sydney Dale 1984).

This responsibility has now been passed to son of the late Sydney Dale, John Dale, who now under traditional cultural law is recognised as the Traditional Owner and Custodian for his late father’s country. The North West Cape Exmouth Aboriginal Corporation also takes responsibility for the Legacy of the late Sydney Dale to make sure the truth and his wishes are never changed.

With the onset of European settlement and influx of white pastoralists, whalers and pearlers operating out of the Exmouth Gulf, history for the area changed with much information being held in many documents. The war years also had an impact on the people and regions, this changed history within the Aboriginal people’s families.

The Cape Range region is one of immense archaeological and cultural importance, encompassing significant Aboriginal sites, such as middens, fish traps, limestone cave dwellings and burial grounds. Radio carbon dating of rock shelters and middens in the Western foothills of the Cape Range, throughout the regions of Mandu Mandu Creek, Pilgramunna and Yardie Creek have yielded the earliest dated evidence for specialised
marine subsistence strategies within Australia. The archaeological excavations have indicated an extensive and sophisticated use of the western coastal resources, incorporating a vast network of trade in place as early as 32,000 years ago and continuing up to 400 years ago. With the assistance of Custodians such as Sydney Dale, archaeological excavations at Mandu Mandu Creek Rock Shelter have recovered ornamental beads made from cone shell, dated to around 32,000 years old, these artefacts provide some of the oldest evidence for the creation of personal ornamentation within Australia (Morse, 1993).

Three Islands Whale Shark Dive would like to specially thank the Traditional Owner, Mr John Dale (Yinikurtira Country), and Ann Preest, Endorsed Representative of the late Sydney Dale, both members of the North West Cape Exmouth Aboriginal Corporation for allowing time and supporting our efforts to understand the importance of helping keep the wishes as requested by the late Sydney Dale.

References
Morse,K., 1993. Shell Beads From Mandu Mandu Creek Rock-Shelter, Cape Range Peninsula, Western Australia, Dated Before 30 000BP. 67 Antiquity 1993. 877-83


The above has been written in collaboration with Ann Preest, Chairperson of the North West Cape Exmouth Aboriginal Corporation. Ongoing verification is currently being had.