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behind the  
recipes

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ENJOYS MORE  
THAN THE VIEW

# WEST WEEKEND

APRIL 07-08 2018



## MY PLACE

Darren Capewell loves  
sharing a very special  
part of the world.

The Weekend West

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COVER DARREN CAPEWELL PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

(QUIZ ANSWERS FROM PAGE 22) 1. Spanish 2. Golf 3. Jenny 4. Dolly Parton 5. Dorothy Wall 6. 1950s 7. Quebec 8. Bill Clinton 9. USSR (Russia) 10. Utopia 11. Five 12. Eggplant 13. Tennessee Williams 14. Sun 15. Shaun Marsh 16. Dominican Republic 17. Head 18. Peregrine falcon 19. Gwyneth Paltrow 20. 1066



**Featured**  
 These people are passionate about one of our State's most magnificent places.



WEST WEEKEND

April 7, 2018

**Contents**

- 4 YOUR SAY** Letters
- 6 STYLE COUNSEL** Cats and clocks.
- 7 YIN & YANG** Exes on point.
- 7 TAKE FIVE** with Famous Sharron.
- 8 NATURAL WONDER** Meet some of the people tending to our very own World Heritage site, Shark Bay.
- 14 STYLE & BEAUTY** White night.
- 16 COUNTRY COMFORT** There's more to the story than recipes in these cookbooks.
- 18 WINE** Classy cabs from Felix the vat.
- 19 FOOD** Rob Broadfield is cooking.
- 20 OUTSIDE** Improve a bug's life.
- 21 BOOKS** A magnificent portrait of a dingo, plus more new releases.
- 22 THE LONG WEEKEND** Learn to paint or catch a Spanish flick or two.
- 22 QUIZ** Test your knowledge.
- 23 THE OTHER SIDE** Robert Drewe has had jack of nostalgic naming.
- 23 I LOVE THIS PHOTO** Island adventures.



*From the editor*

*At a time when West Australian tourism is taking a hit, and we're talking more about the people who aren't coming than those who are, it's good to be reminded of what this great State has to offer. It's been a few months since I ventured up to Shark Bay but the memory of those crystal clear waters, the red dirt and a rather blustery wind (it was the off season, to be fair) still loom large. As with most travel, though, it was the people we met who took the visit from mere "ooing and aahing" over the sublime landscape to an immersive experience. People like Darren "Capes" Capewell, who is passionate about both his country and his people, and shares his stories with a dash of humour and a whole lot of soul. People like Ed Fenny, who was first introduced to Shark Bay as a kid travelling up with his dad Rick and has now called it home for more than a decade, creating an aquarium experience like no other. It's not easy doing business in the regions. The distances are huge, the logistics complicated and staffing is often a headache. It's worth remembering those challenges when you next hit the road: it might make you treasure the joys of our brilliant backyard even more. Now, where the bloody hell are you?*



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feature



**Family affair.** Darren Capewell with niece Tiahna and son Ky at Big Lagoon.

# Country

## COUNTRY CALLING

PICTURES IAIN GILLESPIE

There's a World Heritage site on our doorstep. **Julie Hosking** meets two people who are dedicated to sharing its wonders with the rest of us.

**Darren Capewell**  
Wula Gura Nyinda

**'G**utharraguda, Gutharraguda, Gutharraguda ..." We're sitting under a shelter next to the impossibly turquoise waters of Big Lagoon, in the World Heritage area of Shark Bay.

It's Darren Capewell's country and like all good hosts, he's treating his guests to something special. Even the passer-by who tells us, in the way travellers do, that she's a music educator visiting her daughter from the States.

"Our Aboriginal culture song is very important to retain information so you sing it. Gutharraguda, Gutharraguda, Gutharraguda ... See like that," he tells the bewitched tourist. "It's our traditional language name for Shark Bay and that means two waters. There's a lot of brothers and sisters from First Nation people, over your way, who understand song and the vibration of song and the connection to country – your song is always about country."

"You really roll your Rs like the Spanish," I venture. Quick as a flash, he responds: "No, they're like us!"

Like a moth to a flame, the American draws closer to our enigmatic tour guide. "Will you sing that again?" She leans in, resting her hand on his arm. "Close your eyes. Gutharraguda, Gutharraguda, Gutharraguda ..." The air fills with the rhythmic sound once more. "When you drive back to Denham make sure you sing. There's a big bloke there with a beard, make sure he sings with you! Like-minded people always get called to the same place, I don't know if you understand it or not but that's why you're here."

I'm here because I'm reliably informed that Darren – or Capes, as all and sundry call him – is something of a legend around here. It has not only been his backyard for generations, it is part of him. A part he wants to share with the rest of us.

"I started doing bushwalks out of Monkey Mia and the reason I decided to go there was I didn't know anything about tourism or running a business but I know two things: my culture and my country," Capes says. "And so being out of Monkey Mia helped me learn about those two other things. But I always had ideas to create these other experiences."

Eventually those ideas evolved into Wula Gura Nyinda, meaning "come this way you", an award-winning eco-cultural tour company that offers a range of activities, including kayaking, 4WD tours, and camping safaris. "Gutharraguda is traditional homelands for two Aboriginal groups, the Nhandu and Malgana Aboriginal people, and they have called this place home for about 20,000 years," he tells our small tour group, which includes a couple from Victoria, as we head out of Denham a little later than scheduled (Capes has plenty of jokes about "blackfella time"). "We still live here, we still have strong connection, we are saltwater people, because we live near the ocean, but you will come to see that we have the red sand that comes from the desert."

It is his job, he says, to share local knowledge based on Wula Gura Nyinda's three principles. "It's called EUR. All the experiences we create are like the journeys our ancestors take, which means we always finish where we start so 'here you are' but it's EUR – E for education, U for understanding, R for respect. And you only get respect through education and understanding. And it's respect for two things: respect for country and respect for culture and that belongs to everybody, it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from."

The 48-year-old has spent his fair share of time away from his country over the years. "Like all of the fellas from here, I've gone away for health, education and employment." The promising footballer even had a stint with the Freo Dockers. "Yeah I was with the Dockers for five minutes, wrong attitude, in one

day and out the other," he says honestly, without any sign of regret for what might have been. "Football is a fantastic vehicle for me personally, opened so many doors for me, got exposure down in Perth, which I still incorporate in my life and work today, met some amazing people, but that whole football thing, I think it's one-dimensional personally. I don't really want to be defined as a footballer."

Shark Bay was always pulling him home, and it's where he's built a life for himself, his wife Mira and young daughter Helena. "This place looks good but we say it feels better, all right. Today you get to feel it and take something inside when you go."

We're heading out to Big Lagoon, "one of the most picturesque places in Shark Bay". This rather windy morning, we're also accompanied by Capes' son Ky, who has just joined Wula Gura full time, and his niece Tiahna, who is visiting as part of an internship. The Broome girl is studying a bachelor of science, majoring in environmental science, in Melbourne and says she hopes to one day come back and contribute in a similar way to "Uncle Darren".

Her uncle is a font of knowledge, peppering us with information and anecdotes as we head out of town. Like many of the places worth seeing in this

spectacular region, you need a good 4WD and a great deal of patience, as the roads are sandy and bumpy. Ignore the myriad signs to let your tyres down as you head off the beaten path at your peril.

"Nature in our language is called ngurra," Capes says, rolling the Rs once more. "When nature talks we listen." He repeats the phrase in his native tongue, before launching into song. "Sing it Jules," he urges me. "That's how you remember. It's very important teaching. Everyone is spiritual, every living thing is a spirit."

He points out what looks like a stretch of white sand in the distance. "That's actually salt, there's a place called Useless Loop, a salt mine which was »

*'This place looks good but we say it feels better.'*

# feature

« established here in the 60s,” he says. “The water here, in the bay especially, is one and a half times saltier than the ocean. They export about a million tonnes of salt from there every year.”

In the distance lies Dirk Hartog Island. A former sheep and goat farm, one of seven in the region, it has since been destocked as part of an ongoing project to restore the World Heritage area to its former glory.

“The first part is to remove all the animals that aren’t native: the cat, fox, sheep, goat and rabbit. The second is to breed native animals through a captive breeding program and return them to the wild, including bilbies, small marsupials like the burrowing betong and birds like the mallee fowl.”

The mallee builds big mounds in the ground from sticks, sand and leaves for their eggs but they don’t sit on them. “The eggs incubate in the mound and the mallee bird uses its beak like a temperature gauge. If it’s too hot, it will remove some of the material. If it’s too cold, it adds more. When the chicks hatch they have to dig their way out and they have to fend for themselves. Out you go. We need to adopt that same philosophy as humans,” he says with a hoot.

He pulls the car over by the side of a mangrove creek, which he describes as a kindergarten for small fish, crustaceans and the like. You can windsurf, kitesurf or stand-up paddleboard in the sanctuary but motorised boating isn’t permitted. “You can swim in there, too, but there are stonefish, so you have to be aware. Those spines are really painful and the best treatment is to put your foot in really hot water, almost like third degree burns.” Note to self: Don’t swim there.

“All this country look dry, see, we only get about 233mm of rain a year, that’s pretty much drought conditions. From the outside don’t look like anything here, but from the inside we’ve got everything here – my job is to introduce you fellas to this.”

Capes is also passionate about helping the

younger generation to appreciate their heritage and connect with country. Five years ago, he started running youth leadership programs with a focus on cultural and environmental awareness.

“We facilitate activities which encourage the five principles for the leadership program, which is leadership, teamwork, communication, safety and respect,” he says. It might be nine or 10-year-olds who are struggling to get to school on a daily basis or a group of older kids from Clontarf Academy. “The five principles still apply for all kids but you alter your delivery to suit your audience. You need to be firm when you need to be firm but you also encourage and support. You demonstrate strong compassion and empathy. You could call it a love/hate relationship, like bringing up a kid. You learn so much you know, I do personally, it’s very rewarding.”

As we drive in towards Big Lagoon, Capes stops to point out an interpretive sign, one of many that have been introduced into the World Heritage area in a bid to help revive languages he wants to ensure are not extinguished. “It’s part of the communication strategy we’ve developed,” he says. “I sat on the

**Beautiful backyard**  
Capes regularly takes tourists to Big Lagoon, Francois Peron National Park.



World Heritage board for 10 years and language and culture go hand in hand, as well as country.”

He’s also been on the Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Council for years, an organisation that has helped him learn more about tourism and has taken him to Europe to promote Aboriginal tourism and culture, and encourage more people to visit his great backyard.

“Horrible bloody colour, why did I bring you here, shocking,” he says, as the rest of us take in the obvious absurdity of his statement. Big Lagoon is a spectacular spot to swim, snorkel, kayak or do as the man from Malta we encounter on our way in is doing – take advantage of relatively new camp sites and setting up house for a few days.

After some morning tea under the new shelters by Big Lagoon, Capes leads us up the nearby dunes for a better view. “Remember when I said before when nature talks we listen. If you understand nature talk, you know where to find food, medicine and water. Look, you know the tide is coming in because them mullet are jumping around happy ways, and you’ve got this foam, and you’ve got little sharks coming in,” he says. “And see over there. That pelican? When you see that you know there’s mullet and that’s another way our country talks to you.”

He swings his arms out, encouraging us to breathe in our surroundings, smell the serenity. “When you get a chance, nice and steady, look there. And put what you see inside your wirlgu, your belly,” he says. “It’s just another day in WA. When you’re having a tough day, just think about what you’re looking at, and what you’re feeling.”

The Victorian couple elect to have a go at stand-up paddleboarding, while we retreat to the shelter to chat. “Before you fellas go in the water, I want you to throw sand in to pay respect,” he tells them.

There’s no doubting Capes’ passion for country. The American music teacher is clearly in his thrall, as her daughter tries to break the spell. “She doesn’t want to leave because she likes to listen to you sing,” she says.

“Don’t ever try to dam a river,” Capes replies. “You mean stop things from happening, let it flow,” the daughter asks.

“Don’t try to overanalyse it. She knows what I’m talking about,” Capes replies. “Remember what she’s got inside of her you’ve got.”

Clearly uncomfortable, she decides it’s time to retreat. “Just because you moved to Australia, you can’t run away from it,” Capes says. “As soon as you stop it and embrace it you’ll be right.”

“All right, we have our lesson for today,” she says with a smile. “I appreciate it.”

As she beats a hasty exit, her mother turns back and, leaning into Capes, starts to sing an almost guttural chant. He listens respectfully.

“Where is that song from?” She tells him that it’s Native American, something that had been passed on thanks to a musicologist president Teddy Roosevelt championed in the early 20th century. “But I’m so very grateful for your singing, thank you.”

Capes smiles. “Carry it with you sister, carry it with you.”

wulagura.com.au

Big fish Ed Fenny will never stop improving Ocean Park Aquarium.



## Ed Fenny Ocean Park Aquarium

In the (however unlikely) event of an apocalypse, I've found a bolthole that will keep us well sheltered, fed and watered – at least until the zombies figure out where we are.

A sanctuary for a variety of marine life, Ocean Park Aquarium is also like a little island of self-sufficiency. Where they make excellent coffee. And have plans to farm their own barramundi.

“All these things elsewhere you take for granted – I'll just plug in the power, I'll turn on the water – we have to do all that ourselves and pay for it ourselves,” Ed says, gesturing out across the site. “We have a solar system so we have good reliable power, we did have a wind turbine until the cyclone blew it down. And diesel-generated backup. Then we had enough power to run a desalinator, but then that means a whole lot more storage to hold the fresh water. And septic tanks, we can't pump our sewage to town, we've got to deal with it all ourselves.”

The affable 34-year-old is not big on patting himself on the back but even he acknowledges the scale of what he and father Rick have already accomplished at this Shark Bay outpost. “It's lost on some people but to me it's kind of our biggest achievement – for

someone to come to a completely virgin site and get stuck in ... We have all our own power, we produce all our own fresh water and we treat our own sewage. The only thing we rely on is to take out our rubbish, non-recyclables to the tip.” He laughs. “I often think if the shit really hit the fan, we could live here forever.”

All of the investment has been necessary to build the kind of tourist attraction the Fennys believe the region deserves – and ensure that many people who come to Shark Bay visit the aquarium more than once. To take a tour with a marine scientist, who will give you an aquarium experience like no other; to dine at Oceans Restaurant (the chef spends the off-season in Bali); and, hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, settle down for the night in a luxury eco-tent. There is a long-term vision at work, even if the short-term meant setting less palatable priorities like sewage treatments.

“Once we did all that we could build the commercial kitchen and we could have flushing toilets because originally, we only had long-drop loos and larger bus companies wouldn't come in because they want running fresh water and flushing loos.”

We're sitting out on the deck of the restaurant overlooking the ocean, a view the marine scientist never tires of, even after a dozen years at the helm of a business he first joined a few days after finishing his

final exams in November 2004. The fish farm has been transformed into an award-winning tourist attraction; Rick buying out the surviving partner a few years after Ed started. He took over running it at 22.

“We had big plans. I'm a risk taker, but not so much as Dad! Definitely a bit has rubbed off on me. We really started changing the business, because we both had a really good idea where we wanted to go with it.”

As Ed says, they do things differently at Ocean Park. And he gives some of the credit to his dad, who forged his own path

up and down WA in the 70s and 80s, looking after the famous Red Dog, and opening a series of vet practices. Late last year, at 69, he became the star of his own TV show, Desert Vet, in which Ed and his marine animals feature.

“We broke all the rules with aquariums,” Ed explains. “Everyone says you need to be able to control your light, it has to be underground, low light, so you get these very dark aquariums in general because that's just easier to do. Whereas ours are open air and you get high flow through and they're very natural. I don't think there's any in Australia that are like ours.” »

*‘We broke all the rules with aquariums.’*



*'We don't need to go out and collect lots of animals.'*

behind screens, providing not just barramundi for supper but other culinary delights.

"You put in a heap of seedlings and little plants and the pumps push the water from the fish tank through the grow beds," Ed says. "The two main nutrients the fish produce is nitrogen and phosphorus and that's what the plants need to grow, so you just filter the water so the barramundi stay healthy. We're going to grow everything we need in the kitchen – mesclun, coriander, mint, parsley, basil, cherry tomatoes, things like that, they just grow like weeds!"

It's been a while since our visit so I give Ed a quick phone call to see how his many plans are coming along. It's the start of the season and he's recovering from a flat-out Easter.

The good news is the 600,000 litre above-ground tank that was sitting empty when we visited is due to open tomorrow. Affectionately known as "big red", stage one will enable visitors to see stingrays, reef sharks and other local fish species at ground level and from 3m above ground.

Progress has stalled a little on the aquaponics, though he's hopeful it might be under way by the end of next month, and he doesn't want to jinx the eco-tents by going into detail when the wheels of bureaucracy turn ever so slowly. Suffice to say, they appear to be closer to fruition.

He sounds a little tired. It's one of those days Ed admits where he needs to remind himself why he's chosen to make this part of the world his home, an area he is so devoted to that he joined the local shire council recently to help get things done.

"Just the other day we had someone say it was the best aquarium experience that they'd ever had," he says. "Not the best aquarium – we know we're not fancy – but the best experience. That's what keeps you going."

That and the prospect of enjoying fresh barramundi overlooking the ocean, as you watch the sun set on one of the world's most precious sites.

Forget the apocalypse.

As soon as those eco-tents are up, I'm heading back your way Ed. [www.oceanpark.com.au](http://www.oceanpark.com.au)

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# feature

« While the downside is the need to explain the occasional fluctuation in visibility, the upside is Ocean Park has recreated the same conditions as the animals would experience in the wild.

“The visibility in the shark tanks is good at the moment, at about 5m or 6m, but sometimes it’s about 3m, because it’s in direct sunlight so if we get a week of really hot weather the water isn’t crystal clear.”

Crystal clear water is not necessarily a good thing, however. “If you see a fish in clear water and he has a cloudy eye it’s because there are no plants in there to soak up the nitrogen or phosphorus,” Ed explains. “Whereas in our tanks if fish poo, the plants soak it up because that’s what happens in the wild. The big shark tank, three and a half million litres of water, is open to the air, open to the sun, just literally runs like a normal system.”

There are about eight sharks at the moment, which is about the average, as well as an array of sea creatures, including curious octopuses, slithery (and surprisingly soft) sea snakes, and, my favourite, turtles. The selection and number of animals, which Ocean Park is able to collect through a fisheries exemption – they also supply AQWA in Perth – is carefully managed.

“We figure if we’re doing our job properly we don’t need to go out and collect lots of animals,” Ed explains. “With most aquariums you want to crank as many animals in there as possible so it looks really amazing. We don’t want to do that because it’s not healthy – if you cram a heap of fish into a small environment they are just going to cannibalise each other.”

It’s this depth of knowledge that has helped Ocean Park develop a reputation for excellence. As Ed readily admits, it may not be the most sophisticated looking aquarium on the planet, but the experience is

**Sea life** Ed shows dad Rick how to keep a sea snake well watered (below); one of many specky outlooks in Shark Bay (above right); sharks getting ready for a feed (right).



truly unique. “The aquariums around the world, the animals are usually all on display behind glass and then you hit people with a shop on the way out,” Rick chips in. “Whereas here you get a marine scientist guide explaining things to you, you get a proper education all the way through.”

Ocean Park might hook visitors with the lure of sharks feeding but what they get is so much more. “For us, the focus isn’t looking at the animals,” Ed says. “People come in and go, ‘Oh, we’re going to see sharks feeding, that’s the catch, that’s the drawcard’, but what they actually get is an hour-and-a-half lecture with a marine biologist and everyone just loves it.”

They also love the dive tours and 4WD adventures the company offers. What began as a move to capture the backpacker market in 2009 quickly evolved into more tailored, smaller tours when the dollar went through the roof and the backpackers dropped away.

The plan had been to head over to Dirk Hartog Island, but dodgy weather has put paid to the boat journey. Fortunately, we’re in a region spoilt for photo opportunities.

Ed takes us out through Francois Peron National Park towards Herald Bight. The country is rough and rugged; when the phone rings, he pulls over to stand on the bonnet to get better reception. It’s a call he’s been waiting for, a reference he wants to give for one the many “outstanding” marine science graduates he’s had through Ocean Park.

There’s no shortage of graduates keen to join the team, where an “average” day might mean showing tourists around the park, taking a dive tour out to Steep Point, or running a marine safari. “Everyone gets a chance to get out on the boat and it keeps it really dynamic and better for staff. The staff we had this year, they’ve had such a great time. It keeps them interested.”

Like all good tour guides, Ed has plenty of stories to share. Like that of the pearling camps up and down the peninsula, where those looking to make their fortune set up camp in the late 1800s, heading into Denham for supplies on horseback or waiting for a visit from entrepreneurs like one-legged Leon Krasker, who delivered mail up and down the peninsula and took their pearls back to Geraldton and

Perth for sale. Until one day in February 1916, he fell off his horse, which promptly bolted, and broke his other leg.

“He was about 2km from what is now called Krasker’s tank, a water tank, so he crawled on his arms through the sand – the sand would have been 50C plus.”

Krasker left notes along the way, as well as his artificial leg, but died of dehydration. There’s a plaque for him on the tank, though one can’t quite help feeling he deserved something more substantial in his honour. Krasker Bight instead of Herald Bight, where we give a friendly wave to a group who have set up camp on the beach before stepping out of the 4WD to watch pelicans come into land.

“This is a magic spot,” Ed says. “It’s a great area to bring people because when the tide goes out it exposes the flats and all the sea birds come in. Then when the tide comes in, it’s full of sharks and manta rays, it’s just amazing.”

The bay is christened for HMS Herald, the ship commanded by the English sea captain, Henry Denham, who also gave the Shark Bay township its name. “The ship was anchored here for a while because it’s quite deep water.”

Ed points out kangaroos in the distance that have come to quench their thirst in the mangroves. Although the water is incredibly salty, nature has a way of providing. “The mangroves create a humid area, so at night when there’s a heavy dew the fresh water will sit on top in the mangrove flats, so the roos dig down into the mud and let the fresh water settle and then drink.”

He is also hoping to harness nature ways to provide fresher food for visitors to Ocean Park.

“In Shark Bay, there is amazing seafood but it all gets sent to Geraldton and frozen and then to Perth,” he explains. “We’re allowed to farm fish here and we have a health-inspected commercial kitchen which can double as a processing facility, because you have to have a sterile environment to fillet fish. So this is just a great way of providing some relatively affordable fish and chips to people that is really good quality.”

As you wend your way around the aquarium, a sophisticated aquaponics set-up will be working away

