

ANN STORIE

On 26 December 1982 I had my first dive on the Busselton Jetty. It was the beginning of a love affair that's grown stronger with each dive in this sub-surface fairyland. Since that year my husband Wayne and I have dived many of the top dive sites throughout the world – some were extremely exciting and exhilarating, some we even discovered as the first divers to the region, and some we've dived many times.

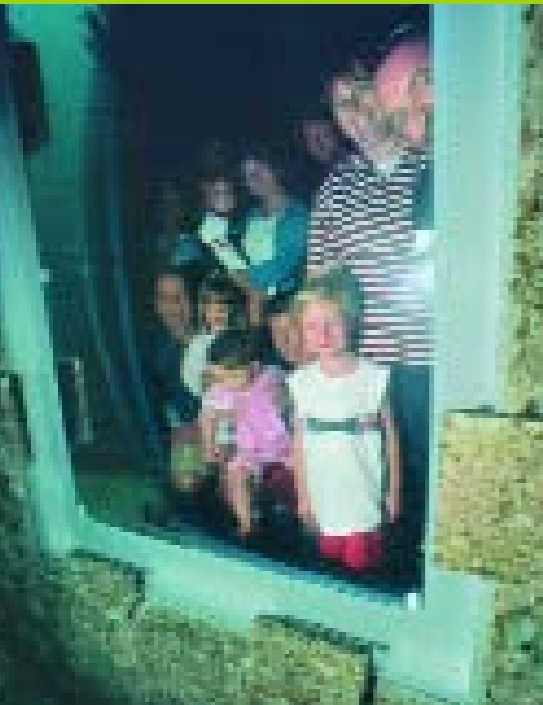
But I can't think of another site that's as easy to dive and as pretty as the Busselton Jetty. It's only 8 to 9 metres deep, visibility can vary from 20 metres to less than two metres and it can be turbulent – but the marine life is always there. On a good day, to slowly drift through the piles, the rays of light penetrating the superstructure, the glittering schools of yellowtail scad and long-finned pike swirling around you and the delicate soft corals with all their associated marine life branching from the piles is like moving through an enchanted forest. Jetty divers around the world will probably

understand this love affair. It's always been more difficult to describe to non-divers what was so special and why I was so captivated. Now it's easy – just enter the Observatory and you'll be in the midst of my dreamland.

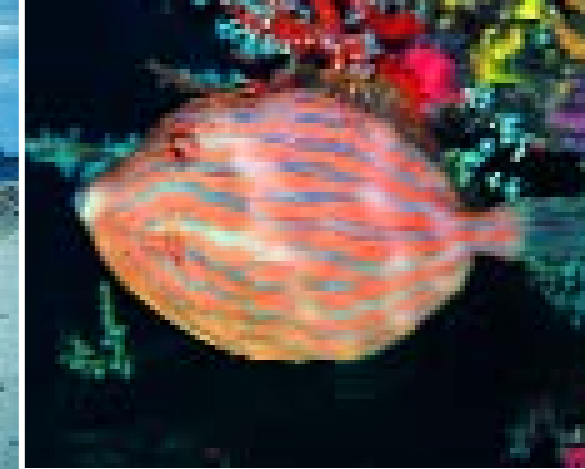
Back in 1982, the Jetty was endangered. The first jarrah timbers that had been driven into the silt of Geographe Bay between 1865 and the early 1900's were rotting and falling away. A cyclone had destroyed a large section of the shore end of the jetty and loose timbers were a hazard to boats. The Government wanted to pull it down. I was horrified. I'd just found an amazing dive site that I wanted to tell the world about and it was about to be demolished before our eyes. I wrote articles. Not just for *Sportdiving* (sorry Barry and Belinda), but anyone who would publish a story on this sad tale.

Then in 1987 the Jetty Preservation Society was formed. Dozens of dedicated people started a community-based fundraising campaign and charged an admission fee to walk on the jetty. Horrors! Many people were aghast at having to pay to walk on a jetty and to fish. Others saw it differently. If money wasn't raised to help fund the enormous cost of maintaining the jetty, there would be no jetty from which to fish at all. I made a point of paying every time I dived the jetty from a boat. Luckily, many large donations were received and eventually, with Government assistance, the jetty not only survived, it flourished. Over five million dollars has been invested in jetty

A DROP in the OCEAN



THE PILES OF LIFE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S BUSSELTON JETTY CAN NOW BE ENJOYED BY NON-SNORKELLERS AND NON-DIVERS. A NEW UNDERWATER OBSERVATORY NEAR THE END OF THIS HISTORIC STRUCTURE ALLOWS VISITORS TO REMAIN DRY, YET WITNESS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND NATURAL UNDERWATER ECOSYSTEMS IN THE WORLD.

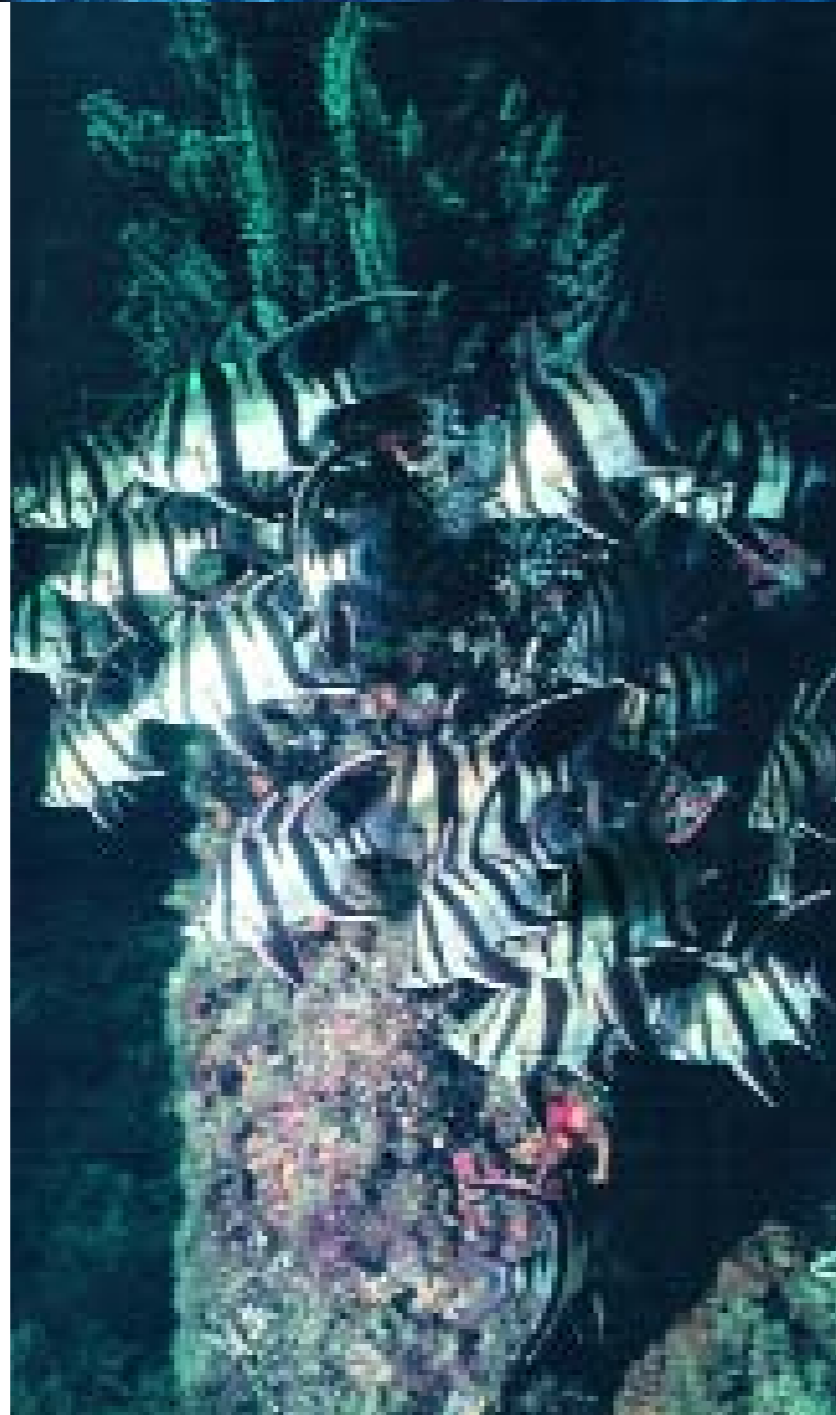


maintenance and reconstruction which now includes the hourly running of a jetty train, an award-winning interpretive centre and the Observatory.

Many people played an enormous role in the campaign to save the jetty. Alf Bussell, from the pioneer family to first settle along the Vasse River, was one of the first to publicly campaign for the jetty's rescue. Ally Scott chaired the Jetty Preservation Society for 11 years. Sadly, Ally passed away in December 2002, just a few months before the completion of the Observatory. Others now have the unenviable task of co-ordinating the thousands of tourists passing through the jetty gates every month. (Within the first six weeks of opening in December 2003, 12,000 people visited the Observatory!)

The Observatory is a masterpiece of engineering. It is 9.5 metres in diameter and descends eight metres to the seabed. As to be expected in such a mammoth project, there were a few delays and hiccups. Friends Peter and Sue Morrison did surveys of the marine life of the jetty to suggest where best to position the Observatory. Solid ground was hard to find in the silt under the jetty, but eventually the Observatory was secured in their recommended area. Disposal of rubbish was a problem until someone suggested sinking a large bin to take all the heavy materials. Much care was taken to save the old piles that had to be removed from the Observatory site. They were carefully chained to existing piles in a 'pile nursery', several metres from the Observatory. We were thrilled with the old growth that had been preserved on these piles that were to be repositioned in front of the windows when the construction was completed. We were devastated when these piles were washed away! A huge storm last winter loosened their bonds and swept them off into Geographe Bay. What a disaster for the Observatory, and oh my gosh, the shipping hazard! But all was not lost. As far as I know, no boats have sunk from hitting an old pile and other piles from the edge of a burnt-out section of the jetty were gathered and placed in front of the windows. And what a magnificent sight they are!

There are five viewing levels with 11 big windows. Between these, large posters written by Sue and containing our photos, grace the walls. Many more plans



are in motion to decorate the Observatory and there's plenty of room. Forty people at a time may be taken through the Observatory without feeling constricted. For me, watching others view the underwater creatures from the windows is like a dream come true and is certainly one of the highlights of my diving career.

At the first viewing window, you are above the water line. The piles directly below the decking are in view and pigeons and swallows nest on the cross beams. You wander down to the next window facing south, and you are at the inter-tidal landing. At low tide, the water laps at the bottom of this window; at high tide it's about a third of the way up. The creatures that live here are described in the posters, but you can see many of them right on the window ledge. Giant barnacles feed as plankton is washed past their cirri with every wave and red bait crabs scavenge for particles on the sill and around the piles. Cup corals, sponges and bryozoans can be seen on the piles just below the surface.

The next main landing with the *Piles of Life* poster faces north and has three large viewing windows. Subtidal creatures dominate this area and new and old piles together demonstrate the process of colonisation. Delicate telesto soft corals, tangled tubeworms, ascidians, bryozoans and sponges can be viewed from here and at subsequent windows to the bottom. Some of the tiny fishes that enjoy this subtidal region can also be seen. My favourite is the false Tasmanian blenny that lives on the piles and darts around and around to find food. Suddenly, it will buzz back into its home of an empty barnacle or mussel shell with just its big eyes, lips, and fluffy antenna visible.

Before the Observatory was opened, a school of juvenile common bullseyes appeared between two of these piles. Three months later, they were still there, but very much larger. Amazingly, we'll be able to measure the growth rate of these animals in the wild without even getting wet!

Another south facing window going down to the next level shows two magnificent piles, one behind the other. Beautiful, white telesto polyps protruding from their yellow, orange and red sponge-coated matrix dominate these. Nudibranchs, crabs, shrimp, cowries and other mobile animals can sometimes be seen feeding on the polyps and on other sedentary invertebrates such as sponges and hydroids. Fishes such as wrasse, globe fish, old wives, leatherjackets, boxfish, moonlighters, talma and bullseyes often swirl around these piles. There's now also a large school of a northern species of rabbitfish that live permanently at the jetty. We first saw them as juveniles a couple of years ago. Ironically, when Sue, Pete and I wrote a book *Beneath Busselton Jetty* published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management and designed to complement people's visits to the Observatory, we didn't include the rabbitfish. Being a tropical species, we thought they'd be transitory. Oops, they stayed! They're now very large and often seen here and from the bottom windows. We're already planning an addendum to the book to include these and several other species of fishes and invertebrates that we didn't think would be easily seen from the Observatory!

On the bottom, four windows face north through the piles while another faces





west over seagrasses. The piles from the north windows are spectacular and many schools of fishes can be viewed from here. Long-finned pike, yellowtail scad, silver drummer and tarwine often pass close to the windows. A couple of octopus lairs are nearby and occasionally an octopus will climb one of the windows to show off its sucker feet! Divers also drift through the piles out from the Observatory, waving to the dry and comfortable visitors inside.

Although the seagrass window looks a little bare in comparison to the piles, it overlooks a quite different habitat. The seagrasses are described in a display next to the window and people who spend a little time here may see much more than first meets the eye. Old

wives sometimes drift slowly over the sand and seagrasses, picking up tiny opalescent gobies for food. Catfish scurry among the grass and even a wobbegong shark or catshark may rest here. The Observatory also plans to open for night viewing when a whole new set of creatures will be seen. Numbfish, gurnard perches, pineapple fish, sea cucumbers, and dozens of shrimps and crabs are likely to appear.

The last time I dived around the Observatory, taking photos from the outside looking in, the manager Grant Henley brought a lady in a wheelchair to the window. I'll never forget the wonder on her face as he showed her the amazing life on the piles – it made my day. Wayne and I also showed my 90 year old father through the Observatory a few weeks after it opened. He's lived every



photograph and story of our diving career, and has wished he could have dived with us. Unfortunately, that was never to be, but luckily he was able to see my favourite dive site from our perspective during his lifetime.

The underwater world has been a privilege for the diving minority. In this small drop to the ocean floor, a new world has been opened up to the majority of the community who can now view a natural and vibrant underwater ecosystem. It may be only a drop in the ocean, but ah, what a wonderful drop it is.