

Success at Last



Weedy Seadragons now protected in WA!!

After a vigorous campaign, success was finally achieved on 24 June 2011 when Fisheries Minister Norman Moore announced that Western Australia's Weedy Seadragons (*Phyllopteryx taeniolatus*) would be declared a protected species under new regulations to be approved by the State Government.

We had started our campaign because WA was the only Australian state where the Weedy Seadragon was not protected and a daily recreational bag limit remained at 30, despite the fact that weedies always die in domestic aquaria. This endemic southern Australian fish was listed on the Environmental Protection Biodiversity Act 1999 as a Nationally Threatened species. By 2010 it had been placed on protected species lists in all other states, except in WA.

The news was met with great joy by Cottesloe Coastcare members and 'weedy friends'. The photo above shows a celebratory morning tea on Sunday 3 July at Mudurup Rocks, Cottesloe. The ocean in the background is Weedy Seadragon habitat!

Our joy was amplified by the following congratulatory letter from the much loved Sir David Attenborough which we received to our great surprise and delight:

2.8.11

Dear Robyn,

What splendid news! I am delighted to know that - thanks to you and your fellow enthusiasts - the weedy sea dragon is now properly protected. Many congratulations. It was very kind of you to have written to tell me so.

Best wishes

David Attenborough

[Click to enlarge](#)

from David Attenborough

When we started our campaign eighteen months earlier we had no reason to be optimistic. Official replies to several individual letters sent to the Fisheries Minister were discouraging to say the least.

But we kept working. Our facebook page was a vital tool in the campaign with loads of superb videos, photos and good community interest. For a small, totally unfunded community group Facebook was a great boon. Wonderful photos, several videos and many articles created interest. Within a relatively short period we had a big following of 'weedy fans' on the Facebook page. This was combined with an email and letter campaign to individuals and groups. People from dive clubs, underwater photographers, tourism organisations, school groups and many individuals across WA printed off petitions and rallied support.

I was hugely encouraged and inspired when I spoke to several community groups and many school groups. Each child from a Year 3 class at Palmyra Primary School wrote to the Premier, Colin Barnett asking him to protect Weedy Seadragons. These letters were added to the Facebook page, with poems, comments, questions and photos.

If i was in charge i would ban hunting sea dragonce because they could come exstink!!!!

From a letter by a Year 3 child to Premier Colin Barnett

Our cause was picked up by local newspapers – the [Fremantle Herald](#) and [Post Newspaper](#) printed articles with photos; the [West Australian Newspaper](#) printed [two](#) articles about the campaign, with photos.

By June 2011 we had collected almost 3,500 signatures of Western Australians on a parliamentary petition calling on the state government to grant protected status to Weedy Seadragons.

The presentation of this petition was to our surprise pre-empted by the government's sudden decision to overturn their initial refusal and to grant protection to Weedy Seadragons.

This sudden reversal of the government's position happened soon after we received the unexpected support from Sir David Attenborough.



In March 2011 I had written to Sir David Attenborough with a plea to support our campaign. To my utter surprise and delight I received a reply from Sir David Attenborough stating that "*Weedy Sea-dragons are among the most astounding, beautiful and beguiling creatures on earth*". He also gave us permission to use his name in our campaign material. This gave us a huge boost; it made quite an impact on Facebook and resulted in some [new articles in the press](#). When I wrote back to Sir David telling him about our success he took the time to send the above congratulatory letter – no wonder we all love him! _

Many people worked very hard for this campaign.

Firstly a special mention should go to Dr Barbara Dobson and Ken McIntyre and the 'Cottesloe Marine Protection Group' who started a campaign over 12 years ago.

Many people will remember that the 'weedy' was the beautiful symbol of the Cottesloe Marine Protection



Sir David Attenborough



Group (CMPG), the community group that worked so hard to have the 'Fish Habitat Protection Area' created for Cottesloe Reef in 2001. This group amalgamated with our Cottesloe Coastcare Association in 2004.

One aim of the group that wasn't achieved at the time was to have the weedy seadragon (*Phyllopteryx taeniolatus*) protected in Western Australia.

In early 2010 the cause was taken up again by some Cottesloe Coastcare volunteers and many other community members with lots of renewed enthusiasm.

I am very grateful to everyone who contributed to the campaign.



Weedy Seadragon off Cottesloe [Photo: Mark Binns]

Special thanks to Mark Binns for his wonderful photographs, his creativity with stencils and for teaching many of us about the wonderful world of *Syngnathids* (and the Weedy Seadragon in particular). Kerry Fletcher was fantastic – her enthusiasm, creativity, music and never-say-die attitude was a vital part of our campaign.

Long term CCA member Giz Watson, MLC, Member for North Metropolitan Region was instrumental in giving advice on the parliamentary petition, providing scientific and all-round great support. Liza Harvey, MLA, Member for Scarborough was a keen supporter of the campaign and was acknowledged by Minister Moore in his press release. We also received much appreciated support from Jenita Enevoldsen and Jill St John of the Wilderness Society.



Photo of Mark Binns creating weedy seadragon stencils



(L) Fremantle Herald photo - weedy sea-dragon mural in Fremantle - artists Kerry Fletcher with friends Mahla and Ruby.

(R) Fremantle footpath chalk art - 'we are happy', weedies are now protected!

Many more people contributed to the success of our campaign, too numerous to be mentioned individually. A big thank you to them all.

In the end we achieved what we had set out to accomplish, the protection of the Weedy Seadragons as in all the other States (Leafy Seadragons have had 'protected' status in WA for many years). This does not mean a total ban on collection. As in all other states a few licensees are allowed to catch very small numbers of Weedy Seadragons for breeding research and for aquaria.

We hope that one day Weedy Seadragons will be successfully bred in captivity as are many of their seahorse cousins. Breeding in captivity and protection of their habitat with sufficiently large marine no-take zones will give them the best chance of long term survival.

I believe Weedy Seadragons can become the perfect, charismatic flagship species to take a marine conservation message to the wider community.



Kerry Fletcher with Nyoongar elder, Noel Nannup

Noel told us the wonderful story of the rainbow serpent and how the many members of the *Syngnathid* family (weedy seadragon, leafy seadragon, seahorses, pipefish and their relatives) came into being. In Nyoongar language the *Syngnathid* family members are all known as wardarn (sea) noort (horse).

[Here is a précis of Noel's story](#)

Finally, a special 'thank you' for the contribution by Kerry Fletcher and Mark Binns. They were instrumental in the final success and for keeping up my sometimes flagging spirits.

And, of course, a big thank you to Sir David Attenborough.

Robyn Benken, July 2011

Some more information:

[Start of Campaign in 2010](#)

['Animals of the Cottesloe Reef Fish Habitat Protection Area'](#) by L.M Marsh