



You are here: | [Home](#) | [Environment](#)

Live rock stars

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The trio of blue-collar blokes behind Baba Marda (Abrolhos Live Rock Pty Ltd) leveraged a lifetime of fishing knowledge to create a limestone substrate that can be used to regrow reefs. After investing a decade of their lives and almost a million dollars, they're now beginning to make waves around the world.

Tags

[Environment](#)



John 'Weaties' Wheatland met Eugene Witby and Shane Bonney almost half a century ago playing Australian Rules football. They were in a small coastal town in Western Australia, the vast, sparsely populated state that now supplies seafood to markets throughout Asia.

Wheatland went on to forge a lucrative career harvesting Western Rock Lobsters, Crystal Crabs and various species of fish in the Western Australian and Northern Territory waters. But after 30 years in business, he resolved to put something back – quite literally – into the ocean that had given him so much.

He set his sights firmly on reef regeneration.

"If the reefs are stuffed, the oceans are stuffed. And if the oceans are stuffed, that means the planet's stuffed," Wheatland says in a characteristically forthright manner.

"I've really caught a lot of fish in my time and I've seen what damage has done further down the track by taking all the lobsters off one reef or eighty five per cent of the lobsters off one reef; it creates an imbalance then turns the reef upside down. It goes into decline pretty rapidly after that."

Wheatland decided he'd attempt to do what others had not been able to, develop a substrate upon which a coral reef could bloom that was kind to the environment. He asked old friends Eugene and Shane to help him, knowing they both had a strong affiliation to the ocean and had both seen it deteriorate.

"We have ten grandkids between us with another on the way and we want them to experience what we have," Wheatland says.

In many places around the world, including Australia, loose rocks, granite blocks, concrete slabs, bricks, tyres, recycled plastic and decommissioned naval vessels have been placed in the ocean in the hope they would become encrusted and transform into vibrant reef ecosystems. The results have been varied, and there have been concerns around the long-term impacts of such materials on the environment.

Wheatland and his team wanted to make something different.

Creating such a foundation is a daunting task by anyone's measure, but even more so for three people with no relevant academic or research qualifications to guide their approach.

"I had an understanding of how reef ecosystems operated; I had experience keeping the creatures that live on reefs, such as crabs and lobsters alive in tanks, so I thought I'd give it a go," mused Wheatland.

"That's the Australian way – you don't want to die wondering. Admittedly, I figured it would take me a year or two to work it all out. It

ended up taking a decade and chewing up over \$800,000 of our money.”

Wheatland and his partners experimented with various materials before discovering that modified limestone showed the most promise.

“There are reefs, especially around the Equator, that grow on top of volcanic rock but most of them, particularly where we are in Western Australia, are growing out of limestone formations,” explains Wheatland.

“After getting nowhere with materials such as concrete, which didn’t produce very much coral growth, we figured we should mimic Mother Nature.”

They combined limestone with cement, sand, water and ‘a few secret ingredients’ to create unique ‘live’ rocks that, after filtration to remove toxins, are placed in the ocean.

“After a short time coralline algae begins to grow on it, forming a perfect landing pad for the [coral] spawn to settle,” explains Wheatland. “Within two years, a scientist would be hard pressed to identify it as being man made.”

Baba Marda got involved with the Batavia Coast Maritime Institute in Geraldton and director, Dr Suresh Job, became ‘a great supporter and mentor’ for Wheatland.

“We’re now also doing things such as partnering with Curtin University in Perth to apply for funding for reef rehabilitation projects in developing countries.”

In 2012, after almost a decade of toil, the men behind Baba Marda* began to partner with other people so that they could scale up their production. After extensive field trials around the Abrolhos Islands, off the coast of Geraldton, their product is now beginning to spread around the world.

“Having met all the necessary protocols, we’ve air-freighted three pieces of live rock, each weighing almost a ton, over to Mauritius and they’re about to go in the water there to help rehabilitate an overfished reef system. We’ve met with the Minister of Fisheries in Chennai and she’s also keen to graft our live rocks into a marine park around the Andaman Islands. We’ve also been in meetings with a big hotel chain, which is looking at using our live rock to line a break wall they’re building at one of their Dubai resorts,” says Wheatland.

“Obviously, airfreighting heavy rocks around the globe isn’t very efficient so the plan is to license the intellectual property to others so they can manufacture their own live rocks.”

If Baba Marda’s product is embraced by governments and corporations around the world, the men behind it can look forward to very satisfying retirements, but financial reward has never been the main focus for the three ‘live rock’ pioneers.

“There were some seriously frustrating times when we thought we’d give it away,” confesses Wheatland. “But I love the ocean, Shane loves the ocean and Eugene loves the ocean. We’ve seen it change and are determined to try to reverse the damage.”

**Baba Marda means water rock in Yamitji, an indigenous language. The name was suggested by Euge and Shane, who are both Aboriginal.*