
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : SARAH HELEN LINTON, ACTING STATE CORONER
HEARD : 8 JULY 2025
DELIVERED : 25 JULY 2025
FILE NO/S : CORC 32 of 2025
DECEASED : PAYNE, STEVEN JEFFREY

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable C Robertson assisted the Coroner.

Case(s) referred to in decision(s):

Nil

Coroners Act 1996
(Section 26(1))

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

*I, Sarah Helen Linton, Acting State Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Steven Jeffrey PAYNE** with an inquest held at the **Perth Coroner’s Court, Court 85, CLC Building, 501 Hay Street, Perth**, on 8 July 2025, find that the death of **Steven Jeffrey PAYNE** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Steven Jeffrey PAYNE** and that death occurred on **10 March 2025** in the waters off **Wharton Beach, Condingup**, from multiple injuries in the following circumstances:*

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INTRODUCTION

1. Steven Payne, known to those close to him as Steve, was a beloved partner, son, brother, uncle, nephew, cousin and friend. At the time of his disappearance, Steve officially resided in Victoria but he had just started a six month caravan trip around the western half of Australia. He was travelling with his partner Catherine and their pet dog Poppy.
2. On 9 March 2025, after travelling for just over a month, they had arrived in the town of Esperance, which is situated on the western fringe of the Great Australian Bight. The couple loved to spend time in the ocean together and Steve, who was a talented sportsman, enjoyed diving and surfing, so Esperance seemed a perfect place to spend a few days.
3. After relaxing in the morning, at 10.15 am on 10 March 2025, Steve, Catherine and Poppy drove to the popular Wharton Beach. They parked and walked down to the water. It was a beautiful day and the water was crystal clear, so Steve returned to the car and got his surfboard and wetsuit. He then joined a number of other surfers in the water while Catherine stayed on the shore with Poppy.
4. Steve owned a shark deterrent device, but he wasn't wearing it when he entered the water this day. He paddled out on his board and started surfing in the waters off the rocks on the northeast side of Wharton Beach, about 60 metres from the shore.
5. Just before midday, Stephen and two other surfers were sitting on their boards waiting for a wave. Steve was the furthest out in the water. The water was clear and smooth and everything seemed calm when, without warning, a large Great White Shark appeared in the water behind Steve and attacked him. The attack was witnessed by the two other surfers. It was immediately obvious to them that Steve had been fatally injured. They both paddled to safety while the shark was seen by other observers to continue attacking Steve's body. Witnesses on the shore captured some of the incident with their mobile phones and drones. After a couple of minutes, the shark and Steve disappeared from view beneath the surface of the water and only his damaged surfboard remained in sight.
6. WA Police were notified at 12.10 pm and police officers immediately attended Wharton Beach, which is some distance from Esperance town centre. There was no sign of Steve in the water by the time they arrived. His surfboard had been recovered from the water and was given to the police. It had visible shark bite damage to the nose. Police coordinated a comprehensive marine and land search for Steve's body, with the help of local Volunteer Marine Rescue personnel and State Emergency Services staff, for a couple of days. During the search, pieces of Steve's wetsuit were found on the shore, along with the surf hat he had been wearing and a piece of his surfboard, but no part of Steve's body was recovered. All the items recovered showed damage consistent with a shark attack, which matched the witness accounts and the drone footage. Expert opinion indicated it was a great white shark.
7. The police investigation into Steve's disappearance concluded he was fatally attacked by a great white shark and died in the waters off Wharton Beach at

approximately midday on Monday, 10 March 2025. This was confirmed by the investigating officer, Sergeant Harriet Collins (Sgt Collins), at the inquest. Steve's brother Matthew attended the inquest as the representative of Steve's family and Sgt Collins indicated that Catherine, who has returned home, has been kept informed and accepts the conclusion of the police investigation.

BRIEF BACKGROUND

8. Steve's parents and Catherine provided significant background information about Steve. Steve was born in New Zealand and was a New Zealand citizen, but he also held an Italian passport as his mother was of Italian heritage. He grew up in New Zealand. Steve spent his school holidays with his family in Lake Taupo and worked at a supermarket after school and generally had a happy and fulfilling childhood. Steve was described as a talented sportsman with a real love and passion for rugby union. It was a family affair, with his father coaching Steve and his brother Matthew when they were young.¹
9. After finishing school, Steve attended the University of Otago in Dunedin and completed an Honours degree in Commerce. It was while studying at university in Dunedin that he developed a passion for surfing.²
10. In 2011, Steve left New Zealand for Sydney Australia, to commence an internship at a software company. He met his partner, Catherine, at a party the following year. Steve loved to travel, so in 2014 he took a temporary placement with his company's London office and Catherine joined him a few months later. Catherine then took up a new position in Namibia and six months later Steve left his job and joined her in Namibia. While there, Steve set up all the software and security systems for the local government.³
11. In November 2016, Steve and Catherine moved back to Australia. They initially lived in Melbourne, before they purchased a house and moved to Armstrong Creek in Geelong in May 2018. As part of the move, they bought a Staghound cross Ridgeback puppy, Poppy. The little family of three settled into the Armstrong Creek community quickly and Steve became a volunteer member of the Country Fire Authority.⁴
12. Steve went through a health challenge after being diagnosed with testicular cancer in 2021 but after successful treatment he was in remission and was considered generally a fit and healthy man. He remained a staunch rugby union fan and played touch rugby socially. He also continued to surf and started open water swimming. He participated in the Pier to Pub swimming event with Catherine in Lorne not long before his death.⁵

¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Report of Sgt Harriet Collins.

² Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Report of Sgt Harriet Collins.

³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Report of Sgt Harriet Collins.

⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Report of Sgt Harriet Collins.

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Report of Sgt Harriet Collins and Tab 16 – Medical Records.

13. Steve was working as the Sales and Marketing Director for a large company and was a well-respected colleague. However, he and Catherine still had the travel bug and they decided to take Poppy with them and go on a six month caravan trip around the western half of Australia in 2025.⁶

THE TRIP

14. Steve and Catherine left Geelong on 2 February 2025 to start their trip. They were travelling in a Toyota Prado and were towing a road camper as their accommodation.⁷
15. They travelled through South Australia and then entered Western Australia. Catherine and Steve were in Kalgoorlie when they decided to leave a day earlier than planned. They had crossed the Nullarbor faster than expected and Steve found the blistering 40°C heat in Kalgoorlie uncomfortable, so he suggested they move on. They decided to head straight to Esperance rather than stopping anywhere along the way. They drove from Kalgoorlie to Esperance on Sunday, 9 March 2025. They washed their car then drove to the Duke of Orleans caravan park, where they had booked a site for a few nights.⁸
16. It was a beautiful spot, and they were happy and excited to be in Esperance. Catherine recalled that Steve was particularly excited about going to Wharton Beach the next day.⁹
17. On the morning of Monday, 10 March 2025, they spent time relaxing in the caravan park. Steve was reading and pottering around the caravan and Catherine did some washing. After doing their chores, they drove to Big Wharton and had a look. They arrived at 10.16 am, with Catherine sure of the time as Steve took a photograph of a monitor lizard, which captured the exact time of their arrival.¹⁰
18. They parked the car in the carpark and walked down to the beach and had a look at the water. Catherine recalled there were about eight surfers out on the water and what looked like a couple of good waves. Steve went straight back to the car to get his wetsuit and surfboard as he was keen to get out on the water too. He then came back down and handed Catherine the car keys. She had been watching the surf and mentioned it looked a bit inconsistent, but Steve was still keen to get in and surf.¹¹
19. Within 10 minutes of their arrival at the beach, Steve was out in the water, leaving Catherine and Poppy on the shore.¹²
20. At the time Steve entered the water to surf, he was wearing a black and blue wetsuit, a wide brimmed black surf hat done up under his chin, a Garmin watch on his wrist

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Report of Sgt Harriet Collins

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

and a green stone necklace on a black strap around his neck. He was carrying his white and black five foot 10 inch surfboard with a leg strap attached to his left leg.¹³

21. Catherine took Poppy for a swim then sat back on the beach under their cool cabana and read. She was planning to body surf in the ocean when Steve came back from surfing and she and Poppy kept watch on Steve while he was out in the water. Catherine saw him catch at least one decent wave but the waves were inconsistent, as she had thought, so he spent time out on the water waiting for the right wave to come through.¹⁴

KNOWN EVENTS LEADING TO STEVE'S DISAPPEARANCE

22. Catherine recalled that Steve had been surfing for about an hour and half when the incident occurred. She was still reading her book and glancing up from time to time to see whether Steve was coming back to shore. At about midday, she looked up and saw what looked like a shark flailing around a surfer in the water. Catherine initially didn't think it was Steve, because the surfboard looked too short. She ran down the beach into the water, yelling 'shark' and warning people to get out of the water. She tried to go further out into the water to see if the surfer she had seen being attacked was okay, but there was still a commotion in the water and it was apparent the shark was still attacking, so she couldn't go far.¹⁵
23. Catherine was looking at the surfers coming in to try and spot Steve, but she couldn't see him. There had only been two other surfers in the water with Steve at the time of the attack and she realised that the spot where she had last seen Steve sitting in the water, waiting for waves, was the same spot where the attack was now occurring. Catherine began to wade out, calling Steve's name, but one of the surfers coming out of the water told her there was nothing she could do, so she stopped.¹⁶
24. The surfer was one of two men who had been surfing out on the water with Steve at the time of the attack. They were strangers, all travellers to the area, but were all enjoying a surf and sitting together in the water at various times, waiting for waves. One of the men later told police the water was "smooth and friendly, and you wouldn't have expected anything"¹⁷ to happen immediately before the shark attacked Steve from behind. Steve was sitting on his board a bit further out in the deeper water than the other two men. The water was crystal clear but none of them saw the shark approach, and the two other surfers were only alerted when they noticed the splashing and then saw the large shark already upon Steve. They realised immediately that Steve was in trouble. He didn't make a sound, even at the start of the attack, and it appeared to them both that he was fatally injured and would have been deceased in seconds. As there was no chance of saving him, both surfers focussed on their own safety and left the water.¹⁸

¹³ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

¹⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

¹⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 5 – Statement of JN.

¹⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 5 – Statement of JN and Tab 6 – Statement of DK.

25. One of the surfers caught a wave in to shore and the other surfer paddled to the rocks of the groyne that was nearby. The surfer who caught a wave back to shore was the one who spoke to Catherine. He could see her running into the water and he told her there was nothing she could do and to go back.¹⁹
26. The surfer on the rocks observed the shark doing figure eights around Steve. Steve was in the water by this time, with his surfboard floating nearby. Steve never made a sound or showed any independent movement and surfer was very sure that Steve was deceased. Steve's body and the shark then disappeared below the water and there was only Steve's surfboard left, which started to float out to sea, and blood in the water. The surfer continued to look for any sign of Steve, but did not see any sign of him, including the hat and wetsuit Steve had been wearing.²⁰
27. Catherine had remained in the shallows, still watching from the shore. She had also seen enough to realise that Steve was deceased, so she walked back to the shore and got Poppy from the person who had been holding her. When she looked back, she saw the surfboard and the blood, but Steve had gone. Catherine was understandably distraught and in shock, so she and Poppy were driven back to the caravan park by some kind bystanders.

THE POLICE INVESTIGATION

28. Sgt Collins is stationed at Esperance Police Station. The WA Police Force received multiple calls from members of the public at 12.10 pm advising that a surfer had been attacked by a shark at Wharton Beach and hadn't resurfaced and a short time later, St John Ambulance also rang the police and advised they were attending a report of a shark attack. A police job was created and Sgt Collins and Police Constable Carina Piahana (PC Piahana) were dispatched in a police vehicle to attend. Wharton Beach is approximately 94 kms east of Esperance town centre, so it took the police some time to get there. They arrived at Wharton Beach at about 1.10 pm, in close association with the ambulance staff.²¹
29. The police were met by members of the public. One of them handed police Steve's damaged surfboard, which had washed up on the shore. It was immediately apparent that the surfboard was missing the nose and the damage looked to have been caused by a shark bite. Sgt Collins seized the surfboard and took some photographs of it. Sgt Collins and PC Piahana then spoke to various witnesses and were shown some recorded drone footage by one of the witnesses. The footage showed some of the aftermath of the shark attack on Steve and then the shark taking Steve's body below the water.²²
30. After being advised of the circumstances of the attack and viewing the drone footage, police initiated a Maritime Search and Rescue (MarSAR), which involved conducting a comprehensive water search for any sign of Steve in the approximate

¹⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 5 – Statement of JN.

²⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 6 – Statement of DK.

²¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Police Investigation Report.

²² Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Police Investigation Report and Tab 22 – Report of Dr Travers (DPIRD).

area of his last known position. At about 2.30 pm, Sergeant Brad Walder arrived at the scene on board a Volunteer Marine Rescue vessel and the vessel commenced a grid search of the relevant area. A second Volunteer Marine Rescue vessel was brought to the beach by car and launched into the water to assist with the grid search. The searchers found no sign of Steve.²³

31. After speaking to the witnesses at the beach and being shown other photographs and drone footage, which confirmed the witness accounts, Sgt Collins left the beach and went to the caravan park with paramedics from St John Ambulance. They found Catherine being cared for by some ladies at the caravan park. Catherine was distraught and clearly in extreme shock. She was assessed by the paramedics and then gave a statement to Sgt Collins. Sgt Collins advised Catherine that she had recovered Steve's surfboard, and she showed Catherine some photographs of the board. The board was confirmed to be Steve's board.²⁴
32. In addition to the water search, a search of the shoreline was commenced by State Emergency Services personnel, Sgt Collins and PC Piahana. During the search of the shoreline on the first day, a piece of black and blue wetsuit with gold/yellow stitching was found. It was consistent with the fabric of the wetsuit Steve was wearing when he disappeared and the material showed signs of ripping and tearing at several locations. A small piece of foam was also located on the beach, which was believed to be part of Steve's surfboard.²⁵
33. After speaking to the police, Catherine had returned to Wharton Beach with Poppy and she sat on the beach for a while. While there, Sgt Collins came to tell her that they had located a piece of Steve's wetsuit and surf board on the beach and that the search had been suspended until the following day.²⁶
34. When the search recommenced the following day, more pieces of Steve's wetsuit were found on the shoreline, along with his black, wide brim surf hat. No other items associated with Steve were found that day or the following, and the search eventually concluded at midday on Wednesday, 12 March 2025, when it was determined there was no prospect that they would find Steve's body. Consideration had been given to using a remotely operative vehicle to search under the water, but Water Police officers advised they would not be suitable to be deployed given the distance from shore, which meant it couldn't be safely tethered. It also needs calm water to operate.²⁷
35. Wharton Beach had been closed to the public by the Shire of Esperance after the attack, but it was reopened at 3.00 pm on Wednesday afternoon, after the search concluded.²⁸

²³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Police Investigation Report.

²⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Police Investigation Report and Tab 22 – Report of Dr Travers (DPIRD).

²⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Police Investigation Report.

²⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

²⁷ T 7; Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Police Investigation Report and Tab 12 – Police Running Sheet.

²⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Police Investigation Report.

36. Steve's damaged surfboard was transported first to Albany and then on to Perth so that it could be analysed by Dr Michael Travers (Dr Travers), a Senior Research Scientist with the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD). The damaged surfboard was subjected to DNA analysis, which confirmed that the shark involved in the attack was *Carcharodon carcharias*, commonly referred to as a white shark or great white shark. After examining the board and viewing the drone footage Dr Travers identified the shark was approximately 3.2 to 3.5 metres in length.²⁹
37. Dr Travers provided police with a report, in which he noted that it was probable that the shark involved either moved Steve from the attack site or consumed part or all of his body, which likely explains why Steve was not able to be found, despite a comprehensive search. Dr Travers also made himself available to speak to Catherine and answer some of her questions about what occurred.³⁰
38. Sgt Collins confirmed that a DNA sample has been obtained from Steve's father, so if any remains are ever found that might be thought to relate to Steve, they can be identified.³¹

DETERMINATION OF STEVE'S DEATH

39. While his body was never recovered, I have the benefit of very clear eyewitness accounts, as well as the objective evidence available from drone footage, to confirm that Steve died at around midday on 10 March 2025 at Wharton Beach when he was attacked and fatally injured by a white shark. I find beyond reasonable doubt that Steve is deceased and that he died as a result of multiple injuries. The manner of his death is by way of accident.

SHARK REPELLENT DEVICES, ETC

40. Catherine and Steve had purchased Shark Banz shark deterrents at an earlier stage. They felt it would push them to get into the water at times when they weren't feeling comfortable. They had both worn the Shark Banz in South Australia when out in the water, to give them some peace of mind.³²
41. When the couple had visited Granites Beach, south of Streaky Bay on the western side of the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia, they had discussed Steve wearing the Shark Banz if he went surfing because they were aware of a fatal shark attack on another surfer, Lance Appleby, in January 2025. There is also a history of other fatal shark attacks and large shark sightings in that area. The couple had spoken with some locals in the car park, who advised most people weren't surfing at Granites because of what had happened in January, so in the end, Catherine and Steve made a joint decision not to go in to the water at Granites.³³

²⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2- Police Investigation Report and Tab 22 – Report of Dr Travers (DPIRD).

³⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 12 – Police Running Sheet and Tab 22 – Report of Dr Travers (DPIRD).

³¹ T 9; Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Police Investigation Report.

³² Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

³³ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

42. Catherine later told police she thought that after they had made it through South Australian waters, they would be fine.³⁴ Sadly, this was not the case. I make that comment not because Steve was not wearing his Shark Banz, but because the risk of surfing at Esperance was the same as at Granites Beach.
43. Some of the world's leading shark research has been conducted in Australia by scientists from DPIRD and CSIRO, to gain a better understanding about white shark movements and population size. This research helps to inform Australia's shark mitigation strategies. White sharks, also known as the great white shark or white pointer shark, occur from the central Queensland coast, around the south coast of Australia, to the north-western coast of Western Australia. Satellite tagging data has shown that the populations are largely divided into two separate Eastern and Western populations, divided by the Bass Strait. The southern-western population moves from western Australia, across the south of Australia and up the Western Australian coast, although they can travel as far as south Africa. The Great Australian Bight is a natural habitat for white sharks. Streaky Bay is situated on the eastern edge of the Bight and Esperance is situated on the western edge, so the sharks that are seen at Granites are likely to be the same sharks that are seen in the waters off Esperance, where there had been a number of recent shark attacks before Steve's death.³⁵
44. It seems that Catherine and Steve understood the particular risks in surfing in South Australia, but perhaps were less keenly aware that those same risks were present in Esperance. However, I understand that Steve was aware generally that there is always a low risk of shark attack when out surfing in the ocean off the Australian coastline. He was willing to assume that risk to have the joy of doing what he loved.³⁶
45. Putting that risk in a context, I note in a recent article it was estimated that the risk of fatal shark attack whilst diving in Western Australia is estimated to be less than one in three million dives. Similarly, I have been provided with information by the same research academic to indicated that fatal shark attacks whilst surfing in Western Australia is estimated to be less than one in four million surf-days. Therefore, the risk is always there, but it is very, very small. That may be of small comfort to the families of those people who unfortunately realise that risk, but it is also important when talking about people like Steve, who surf regularly and get all the mental and physical benefits from that activity. There are many other risks of surfing, including reefs and pounding waves, that are probably a lot more real to the surfers at any given time than the risk of a shark attack, although the anxiety is no doubt always there.³⁷

³⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 – Statement of CB.

³⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 – Police Investigation Report; <https://www.sharksmart.com.au/research/white-shark-distribution-population>.

³⁶ T 9.

³⁷ Exhibit 2 - Buzzacott, P. An estimate of the risk of fatal shark attack whilst diving in Western Australia. *South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society Journal*, 2005; 35(2): 92-94; Fatal shark attack: An assessment of risk for Western Australian surfers. *ACHPER Healthy Lifestyles Journal*, pp 3-4, iss 52, December 2005.

46. Sgt Collins advised the Court that Catherine made it very clear that both she and Steve did not support culling and she did not wish for any attempts to be made for the shark to be found and killed. Steve loved the ocean, and I understand he accepted that he was going into the territory of the animals that belong in it.³⁸
47. I make very brief comment at this stage in relation to the shark repellent device that Steve and Catherine owned but he was not wearing at the time of his death. The device Steve owned was not one of the devices that the Western Australian Government subsidises. Those personal shark deterrent products that are subsidised are said to significantly reduce the chance of an interaction with a white shark. However, no shark repellent device can conclusively prevent an attack. In the circumstances of this attack, where it appears the shark attacked at high speed from some distance (a natural predatory behaviour for great white sharks), I understand it is very unlikely any device would be effective to prevent the attack. Therefore, even if Steve had been wearing his device or another similar device, it is unlikely to have made any difference to the outcome.³⁹
48. I understand there is also some debate amongst scientists as to the benefits and disbenefits of all electronic shark deterrents in preventing fatal attacks. However, given there was no evidence led on this point at the inquest, I do not take this issue further.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

49. Steven Payne was described as a gentle giant of a man. He was smart, kind, funny, laid back and practical. He loved his partner Catherine and his dog Poppy and he cherished his family. They loved him in return and it is clear he is greatly missed, with the traumatic circumstances of his death only adding to their grief at the loss of a beloved partner, son, brother and friend.
50. Steve spent his last months on a great adventure travelling around the bottom of Australia with Catherine and Poppy. The couple spent a lot of time in the ocean together and, like all Australians, they both knew the risks associated with going into the water, although they also knew those risks were generally very low.
51. Tragically, on 10 March 2025, that small risk became real and Steve was attacked by a shark while surfing at Wharton Beach in Esperance. The evidence indicates he was not aware that the shark was approaching and never made a sound when the attack occurred. There were witnesses close to the area and they confirmed Steve was unconscious and showed no signs of life at any time after those first moments. It is hopefully a very small comfort to Catherine and Steve's family that he died almost instantaneously.

³⁸ T 9.

³⁹ <https://www.sharksmart.com.au/staying-safe/rebate>; . <https://www.sharkbanz.com/pages/return-policy-warranty>.

⁴⁰ Exhibit 2.



S H Linton
Acting State Coroner
25 July 2025