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**JURISDICTION** : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA  
**ACT** : CORONERS ACT 1996  
**CORONER** : SARAH HELEN LINTON, DEPUTY STATE CORONER  
**HEARD** : 27 AUGUST 2024  
**DELIVERED** : 3 SEPTEMBER 2024  
**FILE NO/S** : CORC 3445 of 2023  
**DECEASED** : SCHOENHOFER, WERNER

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*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, Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of Werner SCHOENHOFER with an inquest held at the Perth Coroner’s Court, Court 85, Central Law Courts, 501 Hay Street, Perth on 27 August 2024, find that the death of Werner SCHOENHOFER has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was Werner SCHOENHOFER and that death occurred on or about 20 January 1997 in the waters of the Indian Ocean off Point Moore, Geraldton as a result of an unknown cause in the following circumstances:*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

1. Werner Schoenhofer was a German national who had come to Western Australia from his home in Munich in 1997 for a windsurfing holiday. On the afternoon of 20 January 1997, Mr Schoenhofer went windsurfing with a friend, Klaus Maier, at Point Moore in Geraldton, Western Australia. Mr Maier became separated from Mr Schoenhofer while they were out on the water. Mr Maier returned to the shore alone at approximately 5.30 pm. At that time, the ocean conditions had become dangerous, with strong winds and rough seas. When Mr Schoenhofer did not return to shore, Mr Maier became very concerned for his friend's safety. At 6.00 pm, he reported Mr Schoenhofer missing to officers at the Geraldton Police Station.
2. An air and sea search was immediately initiated. No sign of Mr Schoenhofer was found that night, but the following day Mr Schoenhofer's damaged windsurfing board was located washed up on Coronation Beach, nine nautical miles north of Point Moore. Later that same morning, a local cray boat skipper also located a shredded blue and yellow wetsuit and damaged windsurfing harness in the waters near Coronation Beach, which matched the description of the ones worn by Mr Schoenhofer the last time he was seen. Despite an extensive search, Mr Schoenhofer's body has never been located.
3. On the basis of the information provided by the WA Police in relation to Mr Schoenhofer's disappearance, the State Coroner determined that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA) there was reasonable cause to suspect that Mr Schoenhofer had died and that his death was a reportable death. The State Coroner then made a direction that a coroner hold an inquest into the circumstances of the suspected death.<sup>1</sup>
4. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 21 August 2024. The inquest consisted of the tendering of documentary evidence compiled during the police investigation conducted into Mr Schoenhofer's disappearance, as well as hearing evidence from Senior Constable Leigh Woods, who was involved in investigating Mr Schoenhofer's disappearance and prepared the report to the coroner.

## **BACKGROUND**

5. Mr Schoenhofer was one of two sons born to Berta and Heinrich Schoenhofer. He grew up with his younger brother Gunter in a warm and happy family in Munich, Germany. Mr Schoenhofer trained as a dental technician after leaving school and was eventually self-employed as a master craftsmen. He was said to have enjoyed his job.<sup>2</sup>
6. Mr Schoenhofer married and had one son, Matthias. The family lived together in Munich. He enjoyed spending time with his family and also travelling and socialising with friends.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Section 23 *Coroners Act* Direction of State Coroner dated 29 December 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tabs 5 to 6.

<sup>3</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tabs 5 to 6.

7. Mr Schoenhofer also enjoyed an active lifestyle. He was healthy and strong and loved to do sports outdoors, including mountain biking, skiing and windsurfing. Mr Schoenhofer was a very experienced windsurfer and he had travelled the world pursuing his passion. Although he knew that there was a risk involved in this sport, he was known to be a prudent and responsible man who did not go out of his way to court danger and was never reckless or careless.<sup>4</sup>
8. Mr Schoenhofer flew from Germany to Australia with his friend Klaus Maier, who also lived in Munich, and a few other friends. All of the friends were keen and experienced windsurfers. Geraldton, north of Perth in Western Australia, is well known as one of the top windsurfing destinations in the world, so it seems the four friends made their way to Geraldton to experience the windsurfing opportunities it had to offer.<sup>5</sup>

### **LAST SIGHTING**

9. The group of friends had reportedly planned a five week holiday in Western Australia, but the holiday had only just begun when tragedy struck.<sup>6</sup>
10. On 20 January 1997, Mr Maier and Mr Schoenhofer went windsurfing together at Point Moore in Geraldton. Local media reports indicate the conditions on the day were dangerous, with strong winds and rough seas. Many locals and tourists had reportedly taken advantage of the large swell and winds creating waves up to 7 metres high, so many were out on the water that day.<sup>7</sup>
11. Mr Maier returned to shore at around 5.30 pm. He waited for a while for Mr Schoenhofer to also return to shore. Due to the rough seas, huge swells and failing light, Mr Maier and his friends couldn't see Mr Schoenhofer out on the water. After a short time, when he had not returned, they became concerned. Mr Maier went to the Geraldton Police Station and reported Mr Schoenhofer missing at about 6.00 pm.<sup>8</sup>
12. Mr Schoenhofer was reported missing to police at sunset when he had not returned to the beach. At that time, the swell was high and wind were strong, and the ocean conditions were rough and dangerous, so it seemed unlikely he would have remained out there if he was alive and well.<sup>9</sup>
13. The Missing Person Report indicated that Mr Schoenhofer was wearing a blue and yellow 'Body Glove' brand wetsuit, black surf shoes and Casio watch at the time he went missing. He was generally in good health

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<sup>4</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 2A.

<sup>5</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 6.

<sup>6</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 21 and Tab 22.

<sup>7</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 3, Tab 21 and Tab 22.

<sup>8</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

<sup>9</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 2C.

## THE SEARCH

14. Immediately following the missing person report being filed, local police officers began to coordinate a search for Mr Schoenhofer by air and sea. An aircraft was sent up as early as 6.30 pm that evening to look for any signs of Mr Schoenhofer out on the water, but no sign of him was found.
15. The search continued early the next day, and at about 6.30 am on 21 January 1997, Mr Schoenhofer's battered sailboard was found near Coronation Beach, approximately nine nautical miles north of Geraldton. There was no sign of Mr Schoenhofer.<sup>10</sup>
16. At about 10.45 am, a yellow and blue wetsuit and windsurfing harness were located in a similar area to where the board had been found. The wetsuit was identified by his friends as belonging to Mr Schoenhofer and they confirmed he was wearing it when he was last seen. The wetsuit was found in a shredded condition with bite marks on it. It was apparent to locals that the markings on the wetsuit had been made by a shark and it appeared to them that Mr Schoenhofer had been taken by a large tiger shark while windsurfing. Unfortunately, that is a rare but not unknown occurrence in the waters off Western Australia, which is known to be frequented by sharks. Fatal tiger shark attacks, in particular, are known to have occurred in the waters off Geraldton and at the relevant time local fisherman had reported seeing more sharks in the area than normal due to unusually warm water conditions. After the wetsuit was located in its damaged condition, the police quickly reached the conclusion Mr Schoenhofer was deceased.<sup>11</sup>
17. A report from a Senior Scientist at Forensic Services' Biology Department confirmed through DNA analysis that the wetsuit and harness had belonged to Mr Schoenhofer. The report also indicated that following consultation with other scientists with relevant experience, the damage to the wetsuit and harness was consistent with having been caused by a large tiger shark, around 12 to 13 foot in length. This was based on the angulation of the teeth puncture marks on both items and noting that tiger sharks are common in the coastal waters off Geraldton.<sup>12</sup>
18. The WA Police obtained copies of local newspaper reports from the time Mr Schoenhofer disappeared. An article in the *Geraldton Guardian* reported unconfirmed eye witness reports that Mr Schoenhofer was seen being knocked off his board approximately two kilometres offshore in rough conditions. An article in *The West Australian* newspaper also reported that a local veteran windsurfer, Rik Engstrom, who examined Mr Schoenhofer's recovered windsurfing board suggested that a head-high dent on the sail was consistent with Mr Schoenhofer being hit on the head by the sail, which may have rendered him unconscious or incapacitated before he entered the water and was taken by the shark. The veteran windsurfer also expressed the opinion that based on his experience, given the strength of the winds on the day Mr Schoenhofer disappeared, he would have been travelling very fast, which also made it unlikely he was taken by a shark while up on his board.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 2B.

<sup>11</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 2B, Tab 3, Tab 14 and Tab 22.

<sup>12</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 15.

<sup>13</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 22.

19. Mr Engstrom also suggested that it was very unlikely Mr Schoenhofer had done anything wrong out on the water; he was just unlucky. Local windsurfers described the conditions as 'excellent' for experienced windsurfers, like Mr Schoenhofer, despite the risks involved. It was speculated that Mr Schoenhofer was probably hit by a large set of waves that knocked him off his board, leading to the rest. There were reports that he had been seen struggling with his board in the strong winds and seas about two kilometres off shore at some stage.<sup>14</sup>

### **RECENT POLICE REVIEW**

20. On 22 August 2023, Senior Constable Woods from the WA Police Missing Persons Unit of the Homicide Squad conducted further inquiries into Mr Schoenhofer's suspected death.
21. Information was obtained by police that indicated Mr Schoenhofer's suspected death had been given preliminary confirmation by the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages on 7 January 1998, although final confirmation was pending a coronial inquiry. While this is unusual, it supports the conclusion that the family had an understanding that Mr Schoenhofer had died from a very early stage.<sup>15</sup>
22. Family liaison by Senior Constable Woods with Mr Schoenhofer's next of kin confirmed this was their united understanding. Mr Schoenhofer's son (and only child), Matthias Schoenhofer, still lives in Munich, Germany, and it was confirmed that he had provided familial DNA in 2018 to assist with police inquiries in case any unidentified remains were ever located that might belong to Mr Schoenhofer. Mr Schoenhofer's brother (and only sibling), Gunter Schoenhofer, was also contacted, along with Mr Maier, Mr Schoenhofer's friend who had travelled with him from Germany to Australia and was the last person to see Mr Schoenhofer alive. No new information was provided to contradict the conclusion that Mr Schoenhofer died on 20 January 1997.<sup>16</sup> The Australian Federal Police and Interpol have confirmed that there have been no matches on the WA DNA databases with DNA from Mr Schoenhofer's son and brother.<sup>17</sup>
23. Senior Constable Woods spoke to some of Mr Schoenhofer's next of kin on the eve of the inquest, and they again confirmed that they are of the firm belief that Mr Schoenhofer is deceased and that he died while windsurfing in January 1997.
24. Standard enquiries with various government agencies found no record of Mr Schoenhofer's existence after his reported disappearance in January 1997.<sup>18</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

25. Many years have passed since Mr Schoenhofer's disappearance. His family live on the other side of the world, so no family members were able to attend the inquest.

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<sup>14</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 22.

<sup>15</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 16.

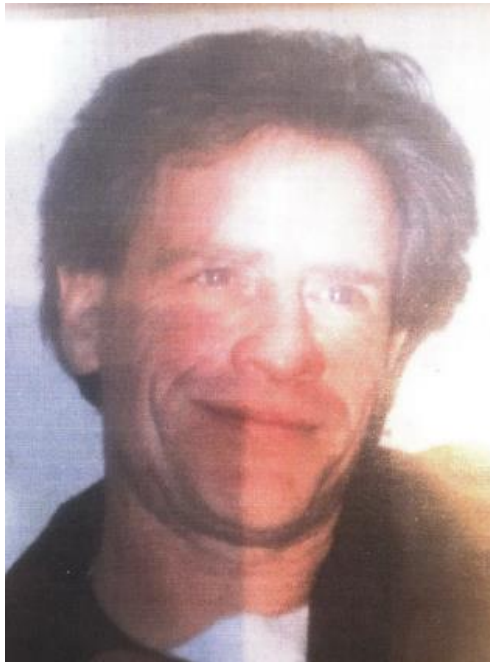
<sup>16</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 3

<sup>17</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 9.

<sup>18</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

However, Mr Schoenhofer's family have provided information to police to assist me in this inquest. It is clear from the information provided by Mr Schoenhofer's family that his disappearance came as a great shock to them, as his family were very close and he was very loved. They experienced a great loss when he never came home from Australia, but they accepted that he died on 20 January 1997 while doing something that he loved and he understood the risks involved.

26. I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Mr Schoenhofer died at the time of his disappearance on 20 January 1997. His death was likely due to injuries he sustained after being attacked by a shark. However, there is insufficient evidence for me to be able to be satisfied precisely of a cause of death as he may also have died from drowning or injury from being struck by his board, and then been the victim of opportunistic predation after his death. That is consistent with the newspaper reports from the time he disappeared.
27. Accordingly, although I am satisfied to the requisite high evidentiary standard that Mr Schoenhofer is deceased, his cause of death must remain unascertained. As to his manner of death, I am satisfied that he died by accident, given the possibilities that are open on the evidence.



S H Linton  
Deputy State Coroner  
3 September 2024