

Up Close

Time for a sea change

Our eastern suburbs have everything, except a dive wreck. Never fear, Jessica Rowe's determined dad has a plan to change that...

✂ Angela Mollard

He's a dynamo like his daughter so when John Rowe gets an idea, he likes to see it through to fruition. Which is why the father of Network Ten star Jessica Rowe can be found in the car park overlooking Gordons Bay seeking signatures for his exciting and ingenious idea.

The keen scuba diver wants a dive wreck to be sunk offshore of Coogee and Clovelly Beach so locals and tourists can enjoy Sydney's stunning marine life.

John believes stripping a decommissioned navy ship and sinking it four kilometres off the coast would create a magical underwater environment that would draw visitors and cash to the region for the next 100 years.

As he says: "You effectively create an artificial reef and it's fascinating what happens to the marine life over time. There are several dive wrecks around Australia but none in Sydney. With so many visitors coming through the city we believe a dive wreck could generate \$7 to 10 million income per annum."

Sitting on the rocks overlooking the shoreline where her father has proposed his grand idea, Jessica is a huge supporter not just of her dad's scheme, but his passion.

"I'm so proud of him," she says, throwing an arm round his shoulders. "I love that Daddo just gets on with things. I love his enthusiasm and it's wonderful that when so many people talk the talk, he's someone who actually makes it happen."

A former policeman, the 71-year-old lived in Clovelly for 35 years before recently moving to the Southern Highlands. But he returns to the area regularly to dive at Gordons Bay where he is an active member of the scuba diving club.

Proudly wearing the club's T-shirt, he points out that unlike a shipwreck, which is sunk as the result of an accident or misadventure, a dive wreck is sunk intentionally as a recreational resource.

He says there are seven dive wrecks around the nation - three in Western Australia, one in South Australia, one in Victoria, one in Queensland - with another planned near Bundaberg - and one in NSW at Avoca Beach. But with visitor numbers to Sydney outstripping the rest of the nation, Rowe believes the time is right for the city to showcase its own dive wreck.

"Artificial reefs created using ex-naval ships provide fantastic opportunities for us semi-aquatic beasts to enhance our enjoyment of our beautiful ocean," he says.

He believes the area east of Coogee's Wedding Cake Island is ideal for the site because



A keen scuba diver, John Rowe is an active member of the Gordons Bay diving club.



Jessica Rowe with her fellow hosts on Studio Ten: Sarah Harris, Joe Hildebrand, Denise Drysdale, and Ita Buttrose.



This wreck, at 1770 in Queensland, is one of many popular dive sites that inspire John in his quest.

it has a bare sandy bottom deep enough to ensure the vessel is stable, there are no extreme currents and it is outside shipping lanes. As well as recreational benefits, he says the wreck would provide educational insights for marine scientists and a fascinat-

ing attraction for non-divers who could view the wreck via an underwater camera.

He envisages divers being charged \$250 a day with dive charter operators offering a series of dive locations including the wreck, Maroubra's Magic Point, Wedding Cake Island and Shark Point in Clovelly. Local roads and car parks would not be affected because divers would set off from the charter company offices.

With several decommissioned ships due to become available in coming years, John believes a dive wreck is an economical and environmentally sound option for federal and state governments.

Traditionally, decommissioned ships are used for target practice, sold and stripped for scrap metal or sent to museums as maritime artefacts. As John says: "The value achieved by these one-off options does not compare with the lifelong revenue for a ship sunk as a dive wreck."

The Member for Coogee, Bruce Notley-Smith, has supported the Gordons Bay Scuba Diving Club's campaign and believes it would be a welcome attraction for the area.

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Up Close

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He told the *Courier*: "It's a great idea that will increase the attractiveness of Sydney especially to interstate and international visitors who are time poor. It'll also provide a fantastic fish habitat. John is working really hard to get sufficient demonstration of public support and then it's a case of convincing the bean counters that it's a sustainable proposition."

In the meantime, John is well on his way to obtaining 10,000 signatures so his proposal can be tabled in the NSW Parliament.

Quoting Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and its celebration of the sea, John is as passionate as he is informed. As he points out the algae in a rock pool, his daughter raises her eyebrows.

"I can't tell you the number of times Daddo has explained to me the various life forms in a rock pool," she says, laughing.

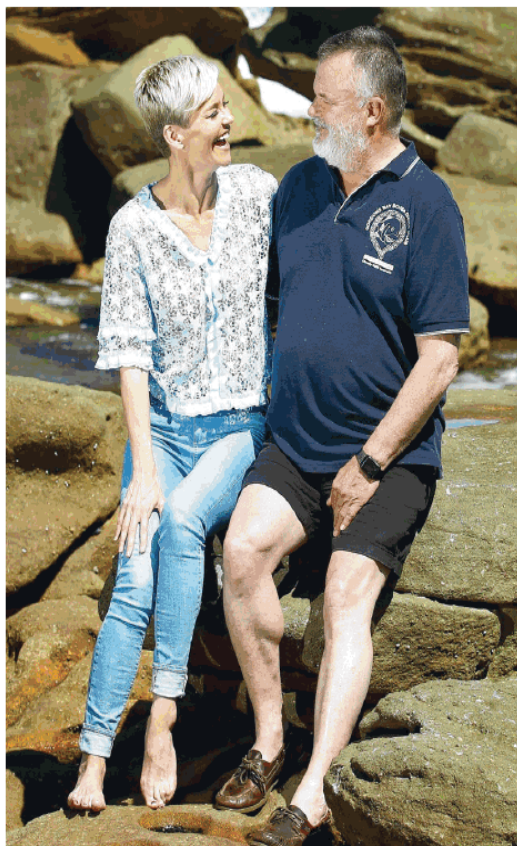
But at heart John is simply a man who wants others to enjoy the hobby he loves. "This would be a real asset for all," he enthuses. "It's good for tourists, good for business and good for locals. Leisure activities are in decline and this will encourage people to be more active and get off their phones!"

IT TAKES TWO

Jessica on John:

"What I love so much about Daddo is his enthusiasm for life and he's very much passed that on to me and my two sisters. Dad's a real community person, he loves the ocean and he's always said he'd prefer to be a dolphin or live underwater."

I'm so proud of him. I love it that he gets on with things. So many talk the talk but he actually makes it happen.



Dad always loved the outdoors and the ocean. He'd take me out in the waves at Bondi Beach and hold me up and I'd be, 'Get me out here!' I was such a scaredy cat — and still am — despite his best efforts. I remember having swimming lessons at Bondi Icebergs. I hated it.

One of the things I love most is watching dad in the water with my girls. They love it. Dad takes the girls on

"Dad always loved the outdoors and the ocean. He'd take me out in the waves at Bondi Beach."

Jessica Rowe

little excursions just as he did with me and my sisters.

I was about 10 when mum and dad divorced. Mum was struggling with bipolar and

dad and my stepmum, Lesley, were very available so we were able to go and stay with them at very short notice. He was still so present

in our lives and we knew we had a safe place to go.

As I grew older I developed my sense of social justice and compassion from dad. He taught me that you stick up for people and you don't take no for an answer.

When I was going through IVF, dad would say, 'All things will be well.' Once we had the girls he was so hands on with babysitting. He spoils them rotten.

Clockwise from main: John and Jessica Rowe at Clovelly; John with baby Jessica; John scuba diving in the pool; Jessica as a child.



John on Jessica:

When (Jessica's mum) Penny was pregnant it was quite unusual for fathers to be at the birth but I was determined to be there. Penny's doctor usually delivered at King George V Hospital but they were doing remodelling so we moved to the Queen Victoria Hospital for unmarried mothers in Annandale because it meant I could be there.

Jessica came out with a huge head of hair.

As a kid she was just perfect — always sweet, always angelic. She melted my heart. I'd often drive the girls to school and they'd often stay with us. I remember the three girls sharing a bedroom while Jessica was sitting her HSC.

When she began at Channel Ten as a news reader I used to ring the switchboard every evening and put on a different accent and tell them how good she was. 'She's beautiful,' I'd say. 'She's so good. You must keep her on.' I think the girl on the phone knew it was me because she'd be laughing under her breath. I was unhappy when she was going through a difficult time at Nine with that idiot, what's his name, Eddie ...

Jessica made a wonderful decision choosing to marry Pete. He's a gentleman of the first order. He came and asked permission to marry her but he didn't have the ring and wondered if he should wait. I told him to go and ask her straight away.

When Jessica was suffering postnatal depression I don't think I realised she was so sick. I was supportive but Pete was the man beside her. He's far more in touch. Together they've done a great deal of good.



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