

National Winner: Project Director of the Year

Mandurah Ocean Marina

CHRIS CARMAN

Setting the Benchmark

Chris Carman is a patient man. The managing director of Benchmark Projects started work on the Mandurah Ocean Marina, Western Australia, in 1998 and only now, more than a decade later, has he collected the title of Project Director of the Year for transforming a sleepy fishing village into “an international standard integrated mixed-use marina complex for tourism and residential and commercial retail activities around it, as well as 550 moorings for boats,” he says.

Carman admits he knew little about marinas in the early days, so given the responsibility to deliver, he took off on a study tour around the world. “Not only did I study how they were designed, I spoke to people who managed them, operated them, and asked them ‘what are the shortcomings in the marina that you find difficult to operate?’ I came back with a pile of information on best practice.”

“I like managing the process of changing something”



CHRIS CARMAN WITH DAVID HUDSON

The result is exactly what client Landcorp, the WA government’s development agency, asked for and more: a world-class marina that has not only improved the environmental management of the area, but has increased jobs and tourism, and enhanced the community’s standard of living.

The first challenge was obtaining stakeholder agreement. According to Carman, redeveloping Mandurah “had been debated by the community for 30 years” and there were a number of stakeholders with widely diverse views. “Once I was given the project it was up to me to get those people all talking the same language. That took me 12 months,” he says. “There’s almost always a solution to the technical stuff. When you add people, that’s when real complexity comes in. The challenge is what’s enjoyable.”

Another big task was tackling various environmental problems, including an uncontrolled marine repair facility, the caravan park’s leaky sewer pipe, and behaviour that saw sailors “just toss things over the side whenever they felt like it”. Add the area’s abundant marine life such as dolphins, crabs, stingrays and fish, as well as migratory birds, and Carman highlights how strict they were with the environmental side of the plan. Not only did they relocate the birds’ nesting habitat away from the site, they did the same with sea life by de-watering the harbour in halves. “We had fishermen go into the area and physically relocate the marine life over the top of the temporary dam walls that we built. We did that twice. That was to prevent death of marine life, having them sucked up in pumps,” explains Carman.

Now the water quality is better than ever and the accolades continue to roll in for the marina. This individual award is something Carman regards particularly highly, however, as it has been judged by his peers on his project management skills, rather than on a construction level. “It gives me enormous professional pride. It also humbles me,” he remarks.

And his community-changing deeds aren’t likely to stop any time soon: “I like managing the process of changing something. It gives me tremendous satisfaction to take something from its pre-existing state and deliver a product that enhances people’s standard of living. But I’m also pretty passionate pursuing things in sustainability; not just the environmental bit, but the ongoing ability of something to keep giving.”