

HOW SERIOUS IS THE PROBLEM?

The recent global decline of sea turtle populations is severe. Of the seven species found in the world, three are classified by the United Nations as Endangered, and three as Critically Endangered.

The time to act is NOW!

Protecting sea turtles in Australian waters and as they swim across international boundaries is a national and international responsibility. How we respond to this crisis over the next 30 years will determine the fate of sea turtles for eternity.

Australia, partly because of its isolation and relatively small human population, has been able to support some of the last globally significant breeding populations of green, loggerhead, hawksbill and flatback turtles. Unfortunately, many of our sea turtle populations are also in decline.

Research has shown that some populations of nesting loggerhead turtles have declined by up to 80% in the last 30 years. Worrying declines are also evident in green and hawksbill turtle populations. If this trend goes unchecked we may never again see these species nesting on the east coast of Australia. Here in North Queensland, we have the opportunity and responsibility to safeguard some of these globally important sea turtle populations.



Tim Harvey

Ultimately it is up to our State and Commonwealth governments to ensure that our sea turtle populations are protected, and to eliminate the larger issues threatening sea turtles. You can help too, by relaying your opinions to government representatives, and by joining groups such as the Indo-Pacific Sea Turtle Conservation Group (IPSTCG).





IPSTCG was established to raise awareness of sea turtles, and to highlight threats to their populations. We invite all people who are interested in the conservation of our sea turtles to join IPSTCG, become aware, and start making a difference for the future survival of sea turtles. Help to ensure that these fascinating creatures are seen by future generations.



Sara Townsend

HOW CAN YOU HELP SAVE OUR SEA TURTLES?

In the boat:

-  Slow down over turtle feeding areas such as seagrass beds and coral reefs.
-  Don't throw old fishing lines, nets or plastics into the sea – take them home and dispose of them properly.
-  Be careful not to anchor on seagrass beds.
-  Report any sick or dead turtles to the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Marine Stranding Hotline on 1300 137 372.

In the community:

-  Don't litter. Rubbish discarded on our streets can eventually wash through stormwater drains and into the sea. If you see rubbish on the beach, pick it up and dispose of it properly.
-  Keep lighting to a minimum if you live by the beach.
-  Insist on ecologically appropriate coastal development.
-  Encourage farming practices that do not degrade catchment water quality.
-  Only eat seafood from sustainable fisheries.
-  Don't harass, touch, or shine lights on nesting, swimming or mating turtles, or emerging hatchlings.

For more information contact IPSTCG at PO Box 1190, Townsville 4810 or email ipstcg@beyond.net.au



The views expressed in this brochure are not necessarily those of Envirofund.

SEA TURTLES IN NORTH QUEENSLAND



Paul Osmond

Sea turtles have survived in our oceans for more than 100 million years. Their unique life-cycle, body shape, strength and tenacity have enabled them to survive and carve out a special niche, while many other animals have become extinct.

In the past, great numbers of sea turtles flourished in oceans around the world, but today the story is different. Currently, nearly all populations are threatened, and their numbers have diminished to just a small fraction of what they were. Largely because of human activities, sea turtles are struggling to survive.



The North Queensland coast is home to five of the seven species of sea turtle found in the world. According to the United Nations, the green turtle, Olive Ridley turtle, loggerhead turtle, and hawksbill turtle are under threat. Not enough is known about the flatback turtle to indicate its status.



Ian Bell

Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*)



Tim Harvey

Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*)



Helen Garnham

Green (*Chelonia mydas*)



Helen Garnham

Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)



Tim Harvey

Flatback (*Natator depressus*)

WHY IS NORTH QUEENSLAND IMPORTANT FOR SEA TURTLES?

The Queensland coast is home to some of the most important turtle nesting and feeding sites in the world. Even in built-up areas, many beaches are regularly used by nesting turtles.

Seagrass beds provide important feeding habitat for green turtles, whilst flatbacks forage for soft corals and sea cucumbers and loggerheads crunch crustaceans. Hawksbills live off algae and sponges found on inshore reefs.

Sea turtles exhibit a strong homing behaviour, returning to nest on beaches where they themselves hatched from eggs. For example, a female turtle hatched in the Townsville region is likely to return to breed there when she matures, which can take 30-50 years.

It is important to protect coastal areas in northern Queensland so that turtle feeding and breeding habitats can be maintained.



Roger Beeden

THREATS TO SEA TURTLES

Sea turtles grow very slowly, and may live to be over 100 years old. During their lifetime they face many natural and human-related threats.

If these threats are allowed to continue at their present rate, we could see the extinction of some sea turtle species within our own lifetime.

Pollution from industrial waste and agriculture can damage turtle habitats. Run-off containing high levels of nutrients such as phosphorus, nitrogen and potassium creates algal blooms, which damage seagrass beds.



Ian Bell

Feral pigs, foxes and wild dogs dig up sea turtle nests to eat the eggs. Many turtle nests along the North Queensland coast are dug up by feral animals. This is a major threat in some areas.



Mark Hallam

Artificial lights near the shore can disorientate both nesting adult females and hatchlings. Adult females may not come in to nest on lit beaches, and if they do, they may have trouble finding their way back to sea. Hatchlings emerging from their nests are programmed to head to the brightest horizon, which is normally above the ocean. Lights along beaches confuse the hatchlings, and can make them head inland instead of out to sea. This can lead to an increase in hatchling deaths.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people have hunted sea turtles and collected their eggs for thousands of years. Hunting turtles is both culturally and economically important to them. However, **current harvest levels**, particularly of adult female sea turtles, are poorly understood and may be unsustainable. It is important to understand the impact hunting has on sea turtle populations, so we can ensure that sea turtles survive for future generations.

Coastal development has degraded many turtle nesting sites. Building rock breakwalls has caused the loss of precious sandy nesting beaches.



Ian Bell

Fishing, trawling, dredging shipping channels, construction of canal housing estates and bad anchoring practices can degrade the inshore feeding grounds used by sea turtles. Sea turtles may also become entangled in discarded fishing nets and drown.

Many green turtles in southern Queensland, and some along the North Queensland coast, have contracted a deadly virus called **Green Turtle Fibropapilloma disease**. This disease may be linked to poor water quality, which can be traced back to coastal development and other land use practices.



Ian Bell

Boat strikes are a common cause of injury and death to sea turtles. Turtles are hit by boats when they come to the surface to breathe or bask, or while feeding or mating in shallow seagrass or reef areas.



Kath Martin

Plastic bags, discarded fishing line and other rubbish is often eaten by turtles, who mistake it for food. This may either choke the turtle, or block its gut so it can no longer feed, and starves to death.

