



THE INDO-PACIFIC SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION GROUP

March 2003 Newsletter

The year in review

*Highlights from a detailed report presented to the Annual General Meeting on February 9, by IPSTCG President **Tim Harvey***

What a year! 2002 turned out to be an exciting year for IPSTCG, with much good news. The hard work that many members had put in over the previous couple of years really started to bear fruit.

Funding

In 2002 we were extremely successful with our applications for funding. We obtained a further Coastcare grant for \$13,550, followed at the end of 2002 by the announcement that we were a recipient of one of the inaugural Envirofund Awards. The \$29,151 from this award will enable us to start several new initiatives and expand our monitoring and education program during the 2003/4 nesting season.

We received a Thuringowa Community Grant for \$3,748, which will enable us to include the Thuringowa area and northern beaches in our activities. In addition, we were granted \$5,000 by Zodiac, the rubber boat people to undertake a series of clean-ups in selected areas of Cleveland Bay. Furthermore, Zodiac also presented us with a fine new inflatable boat.

We also had a couple of unexpected amounts. A film crew from the USA donated \$300 and we received \$1,000 from Townsville City Council as a prize in their Environment Awards.

I would like to thank everybody who put in the time and effort to ensure the grant applications were successful, especially Shelley, Cassie, Neil, Ian and Sara.

» *Continued on page 2*

Diary Dates

Monday March 10 – 14
Sea Week Turtle Display at
Thuringowa Library.

Saturday 15 March – Turtle education workshop for teachers at Townsville and Thuringowa schools, introducing the Turtle Education kit prepared by IPSTCG. To participate please contact Rachel Allen rachel.allan@jcu.edu.au

March - April – Turtle talks for local residents of Northern beaches and Magnetic Island, please check local notice boards for details.

Sunday 6 April – IPSTCG stall at the Townsville Cruising Yacht Club Open Day. Please volunteer to help if you can (contact Rachel Allen rachel.allan@jcu.edu.au) or drop by and say hello.

Who's who for 2003

President: Tim Harvey

Vice President: (position open)

Treasurer: Sara Townsend

Correspondence Secretary: Helen Chambers

Minutes Secretary: Jutta Jaunzemis

Membership Secretary: Mariana Nahas

LMAC representative: Rachel Allan

Scientific Officers: Mark Read, David Savage,
Neil Mattocks

Newsletter Editor: Julia Hazel

Membership and newsletters

Membership currently stands at 57 and includes two affiliated groups: C4 and the Low Isles Preservation Society.

Sara has done a fantastic job in updating and keeping track of the current membership and compiling the newsletters. To many members, Sara is the face of IPSTCG and I would like to express my thanks for undertaking this vital but unsung job.

Project Officer

Karen Bolles, our part-time Project Officer for the 2001/02 monitoring season finished in mid 2002. Karen was the first part-time Project Officer appointed by IPSTCG and in her short time with us made a large impact on our progress. We wish her all the best in the USA.

The new Project Officer for the 2002/03 nesting season, Rachel Allen, was appointed in November and has already greatly expanded the work that Karen started.

Local Monitoring

Local monitoring activity was once again a key feature for IPSTCG during 2002. We continued to monitor at AIMS in the nesting season 2002/03, and received help for several other local beaches. Although the monitoring of nesting activity has now ended for this season, we continue to receive information about foraging turtles in Cleveland Bay from Magnetic Island Sea Kayaks and other interested groups and individuals.

In December 2002, three IPSTCG personnel visited Cape Bowling Green. Evidence of nesting activity was scant, but a single track was found at the end of the spit and the remains of two dead turtles were discovered. Anecdotal evidence from fishermen in the area suggested that turtles do come ashore during the nesting season but usually not on the north-eastern exposed section.

Evidence of nests was found, of which several had been predated, possibly by goannas.

As part of a Department of Defence initiative IPSTCG monitored turtle activity on Rattlesnake and Herald Islands in the Halifax Bay Defence Practice Area.

Three flights were made over the islands during December 2002 and January 2003, and a patrol visited the islands during January 2003, accompanied by Defence personnel. Thirteen tracks were found on Rattlesnake Island along with evidence of possible nesting, whilst on Herald Island five tracks were discovered with accompanying body pits. This suggests that these islands

could be significant turtle nesting sites in the area. The presence of recreational fishermen camping on the islands was cause for concern. A report is being compiled, with accompanying recommendations.

Coral Sea monitoring

In partnership with Environment Australia, IPSTCG has been involved with monitoring green sea turtle nesting in the Coringa-Herald National Nature Reserve, some 200 nautical miles east of Cairns, for a number of years.

Following up on our involvement in December 2001 (see previous newsletters) the next patrol took place in March 2002. This trip was staffed by three IPSTCG volunteers who carried out nest excavations to check hatchling success.

To round off an excellent year, no less than 15 IPSTCG volunteers were involved in the monitoring in November/December 2002. On this patrol many turtles were seen digging body pits in a number of locations on the same night, and many abandoned their egg chambering efforts as the surrounding dry sand kept collapsing into the chambers.



Aerial monitoring of Herald Island
[Rachel Allen photo]



Volunteers ready for the night patrol on Herald Cay in the Coral Sea
[Mark Hallam photo]

Community involvement

Our contact with the crew of the tall ship 'Windeward Bound' was reported in our June-July 2002 newsletter. Our stall at Ecofiesta in June 2002 was well attended, with over 150 signatures added to our petition to the Queensland Government about a turtle management plan and many children helping paint a "Kids 4 Turtle Conservation" banner. Our new brochure, *Sea Turtles in the Townsville Region*, was well received and our stickers were a great success. The IPSTCG hats sold out completely!

For the first time we had a stall at the Townsville Show. This proved ultimately very successful despite initial muted interest. Many signatures were collected for our petition to the Queensland Government. In February 2003, we took part in the North Queensland Wetlands Festival Family Fun Day at Ross Park, Thuringowa. The event was not well publicised and this was reflected in the poor turn-out.

A point to note is that the same personnel are manning the stalls each time. We really need to attract more helpers to these events if we are to relieve the workload on people and also train new recruits to deal with the public.

Monitoring workshops

We ran our first monitoring workshop in November 2002, where attendees learned how to recognise turtle tracks, and measure and tag a turtle. The workshop was run by Ian Bell (QPWS). It proved to be an excellent session and was well attended by an enthusiastic group of volunteers.

At the beginning of February 2003 we invited Mark Hallam up from Canberra to help run a workshop at Mission Beach for C4, the local conservation group. C4 have undertaken incidental monitoring over the last two nesting seasons and the workshop will enable them to become more involved. This workshop saw the launch of our new Monitoring Manual and proved to be very successful.

Educational, advocacy and publicity

In addition to the manual, PowerPoint presentations have been created for

educational talks and monitoring workshops for community groups and schools in our area.

In 2002, IPSTCG started a series of bi-monthly talks at James Cook University and gave several informative talks to public volunteers and local community conservation groups, including Reef HQ volunteers and the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland.

We gave talks at three schools in the area as part of our school's program. We plan to expand this program during the coming year and encourage greater involvement by local teachers.

We continued to lobby on behalf of sea turtles. In August, we voiced our concerns and gave comments on the new Representative Areas Program being undertaken by GBRMPA, in its efforts to re-zone the GBR

Marine Park. IPSTCG also joined forces with the Local Marine Advisory Committee to seek practical solutions to the problem of boat strikes on turtles in the Cleveland Bay area.

We made a submission to the federal government opposing the proposed new development at Radical Bay on Magnetic Island, and gave our opinion on the Shark Control Program in Cleveland Bay.

Media involvement during 2002 has been considerable. We have had articles in the Townsville Bulletin and the Magnetic Times, and we have featured on ABC local radio and local TV.

Clean-up the sea

We all know that rubbish is potentially lethal to turtles, and public awareness of its impact is high on our priority list. Several IPSTCG volunteers took part in the 2002 Clean Up Australia Day. The grant from Zodiac enabled us to mount a clean-up operation in selected areas of Cleveland Bay. The first Clean Up took place on December 7 and concentrated on Ross Creek, the Breakwater Marina, the Strand and Pallarenda Beach. The event attracted nearly 40 volunteers, who collected ~4,500 items of rubbish, including 1,300 cigarette butts, and 2,000 plastic bags and bottles, in just two hours!

Advance notice!

Sunday 1 June -- Ecofiesta at Queens Park, artist Lynn Scott Cumming will create a turtle sculpture during the event, assisted by school students, IPSTCG needs a few volunteers to assist.

Coral Sea turtle monitoring – an insider’s view

IPSTCG volunteer Debbie Bower recounts her experiences as a member of the monitoring team during December 2002.

I was nearly ready to vomit. Consequently my concentration was slightly preoccupied during our arrival to North East Herald Cay, aboard the Customs vessel ‘Botany Bay’. I eventually managed to lift my head from in between my legs and open my eyes to find a new colour of blue existed, in the ocean. I was undoubtedly in the most beautiful landscape I’d ever seen. I was in paradise to survey, tag and measure *Chelonia mydas* – the green sea turtle. The dinosaurs of the sea.

The island on which we camped was small enough to comfortably walk around, yet large enough to escape for recuperation. At any time of the day or night anyone who dared to venture into close vicinity with Mark was destined to fall victim to the ever-ready digital camera to which he was permanently attached. Eight of us participated on the third trip on the island. We shared it with a variety of wildlife. This included very verbal and phosphorously active boobies and my replacement pet - hermit crabs.

By day we escaped the heat by relief from the ocean. Sometimes we had awesome rides on the Customs tender boats to bommies offshore, where we enjoyed snorkeling. The ocean was completely clear to the very seabed and we shared it with at least one magnificence, yet not too scarily large 2m shark and beautiful clams. By 7pm most nights our vegetarian dinner had been knocked back, (to the frustration of a few of us carnivores) and the real fun began.

The island was split into three sectors and we would split ourselves into groups and each monitor an area for the night. As we were the last group that went to the island, most of the ‘girls’ had been tagged already and a few personalities were already well known. Our favorite of these being a girl aptly named

‘Stumpy’ to which Sarah and I tried our hardest to replace with ‘Beautiful’, a name, which simply wouldn’t stick.

Our poor celebrity had only half of one back flipper and none of the other. However through her perilous journey she became an inspiration to us all. She touched our hearts with her early arrival to the beach each night and refusal to give up digging an attempted egg chamber, which was impossible to achieve.

We all saw at least one girl lay. I can safely say it was, at least for me, the highlight of the trip and most magical experience ever. I believe we all learned something while we were out there, in Commonwealth and remote waters - what we called our reality. I found the magnificence of these ancient mariners and a reason for IPSTCG.

When you’re dead tired and a girl flicks sand in your eye, crushes your foot and flips you half way across the beach, all it takes is one look into her big, magic eyes to know why you’re there. And as Mark always says, “it’s all part of the Coral Sea experience”.



One of the ‘girls’ of the Coral Sea makes her way slowly across the beach at North East Herald Cay.

Rachel Allen photo

Return to the wild

A stranded Hawksbill turtle recently spent two months in an aquarium tank at Reef HQ, Townsville, receiving expert veterinary care and regaining its strength on a diet of squid provided by Reef HQ staff.

By mid January the turtle appeared fully recovered and fit to return to its natural environment.

It was cleaned, weighed, measured, photographed and finally tagged using equipment supplied by IPSTCG, then transported by QPWS staff to Cardwell to be released near the area it was found.