



THE INDO-PACIFIC SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION GROUP

October 2003 Newsletter

Recovery Plan for Marine Turtles in Australia

Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Dr David Kemp announced the release of the national recovery plan for Australia's marine turtles on 29 July 2003.

"These ancient creatures have lived in the ocean for more than 100 million years," Dr Kemp said. "They are part of our unique natural heritage, with six of the world's seven species living in Australian waters."

"The numbers of marine turtles nesting on Australian shores have declined dramatically in the past 25 years," Dr Kemp said.

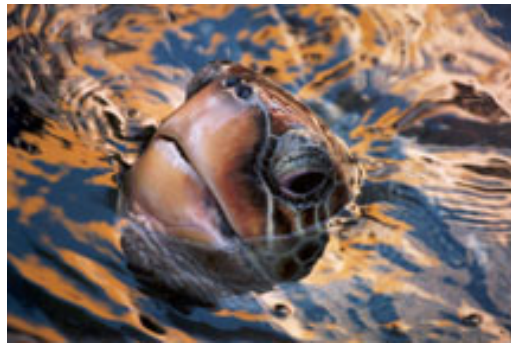
"For example, in 1976 around 3500 loggerhead

females nested on the Queensland coast, whereas only 300 nested in 1997.

"This national recovery plan is designed to reverse that decline as a matter of urgency and ensure we restore turtle populations over the next few decades.

In his announcement, Dr Kemp drew attention to two aspects of the recovery plan:

- establishment of a national monitoring program for turtles
- seeking to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the national recovery effort.




A dramatic cover photo graces the Recovery Plan for Marine Turtles in Australia
photo © Environment Australia & Trevor J Ierino

"I urge the State and Territory governments to establish

arrangements with Indigenous communities as a priority, as they are all custodians of significant turtle populations," said Dr Kemp.

The national plan was developed by a team of key stakeholders from State and Territory governments, industry, the Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation and Humane Society International. A wide consultation process included Indigenous groups such as the Northern Land Council and the Larrakia Nation, non-government organisations, the fishing industry and the public.

Diary Dates



Sunday 2 November 2003, noon-3pm, BBQ at the Strand arranged by Townsville City Council; all clean-up volunteers and their families invited to join in, meet at the BBQ near the Strand Water Play area – great fun!

November – December 2003: IPSTCG volunteers will have the opportunity to assist with Coral Sea Turtle Research, as last year. Dates yet to be announced, watch for email notification.

A copy of the Marine Turtle Recovery Plan, with maps and pictures, is available on the Environment Australia web site at www.ea.gov.au/coasts/species/turtles or by telephoning free-call 1800 803 772.

Delayed urgency?

Referring to the decline in turtle populations, Dr Kemp said, “This national recovery plan is designed to reverse that decline as a matter of urgency...”

However, in his announcement, Dr Kemp did not mention the fact that five years have elapsed since public release of the Draft Recovery Plan for Marine Turtles.

The objectives and recovery actions of the newly released Plan remain substantially the same as the 5-year old Draft Plan. And fortunately the delay in finalising the official plan has not prevented implementation of several of the practical recovery initiatives identified by the original Recovery Team, which drafted the plan more than five years ago.

Nevertheless the 5-year wait for public release of the plan may diminish its symbolic value and must raise some doubt about the Governmental sense of urgency as regards turtle conservation.

Debris data to be presented to Townsville City Council

Thanks to all volunteers who participated in the IPSTCG clean-up of the Strand, Ross Creek and Breakwater Marina on September 14. Eighteen bags of rubbish were collected and details recorded on tally sheets by a total of 32 people in about two hours, some on foot and others by boat (photos below and above right).

The most numerous single item collected was cigarette butts, with over 1000 picked up. Plastic bags and other plastic debris once again made a depressingly large contribution by volume.



IPSTCG will now compile a report for Townsville City Council based on the data collected from our series of four clean-up operations. It is hoped that increased understanding of diverse sources of marine debris may eventually help to reduce the amount of garbage reaching the sea.

During August, Environment Minister David Kemp announced that marine debris has been declared a key threatening process under federal law, and a national threat abatement plan will be developed in consultation with stakeholders, such as local councils, state governments and industry and environment groups.

While this official declaration is welcome news, it is likely that many more marine animals will suffer painful deaths from encounters with marine debris before the official threat abatement plan is developed and implemented.

Meanwhile IPSTCG members can make a difference by minimising their own waste, ensuring all garbage is placed securely in an appropriate waste bin, and educating others about the risks that discarded litter poses to marine wildlife. Turtles are particularly at risk from accidentally swallowing drifting plastic bags or becoming entangled in discarded fishing line and netting.

Public comment on GBR protection

Staff at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) are “progressing well” with the analysis of more than 21,300 public submissions received as part of the Representative Areas Program (RAP),

according to a recent GBRMPA media release.

IPSTCG contributed a 38 page submission on the proposed rezoning, supported by a personal letter from IPSTCG President Tim Harvey to GBRMPA Chair Virginia Chadwick, which included the following points:

- The protection of the biodiversity of the Park must be the number one priority. We applaud the courage that GBRMPA has shown and fully support all Pink (PZ) and Green (MNPZ) zones currently in the Draft Zoning Plan. However, we stress that on no account should any of these zones be reduced.
- GBRMPA states that all bioregions within the Park will have at least 20% of their area protected. However, the Draft Zoning Plan does not include a Preservation Zone (PZ) in each bioregion. If protection is to be taken seriously a PZ needs to be placed in all bioregions. To enable maximum protection each PZ should have a buffer of an MNPZ that is of at least the minimum size for that zone (ie 20 kilometres along its shortest side).
- If possible, without reducing the zoning in the outer areas, more inshore areas should be protected by MNP zones, especially around recognised sites of outstanding natural value, such as the Hinchinbrook area.
- Migratory species such as sea turtles and dugong present special problems for environmental management. Areas recognised as having important populations of these migratory animals, such as Shoalwater Bay, need the strongest possible protection. All dugong protection areas should automatically be made MNP zones, and recognised migration 'corridors' should be protected to allow the free movement of migratory species.

Filming turtle tagging for television

By Sara Townsend

IPSTCG has been keeping sea turtles on the agenda so effectively lately that we have found ourselves (and the turtles of course) the subject of several documentary films.

In June filmmaker Paul Roy of Iguana Films filmed some of our turtle catching efforts in Edgecombe Bay at Bowen, for a documentary series called "Reef Rangers" that he has been commissioned to make for the ABC. He went for the very unobtrusive approach of quietly filming everything we did whilst trying to keep dry and avoid turtle flippers.

In late July we became the subject of a slot in an episode of "Snake-catcher" being filmed by WA company Prospero Productions. They had been commissioned by the UK Discovery Channel to produce a series where a WA snake catcher named Bruce travels round Australia investigating a variety of reptiles as he goes.

IPSTCG volunteered to host the sea turtle filming again at our favourite Green turtle foraging area in Bowen. We were all slightly shocked to work with a larger company after Paul's low-key approach. The Prospero crew consisted of Producer, Cameraman, Sound man, Bruce the snake catcher, and a Production manager. How were we going to fit them all on our boats and still have enough people to catch turtles? We needed two boat drivers and were constrained by a maximum of four people to a boat.

After some juggling we set off with just two IPSTCG "jumpers". The water was fairly chilly and we needed to swap "jumpers" and drivers during the day. Two days of filming and numerous "takes" later, we emerged, having caught a total of 20 turtles (19 Greens and 1 Hawksbill) and with a much greater appreciation of how films are made!

Prospero were highly satisfied with their footage and took us all out to dinner as a thank-you. We are looking forward to seeing the results and are lining up UK friends and relatives to record the program as soon as it is released. It won't be released in Australia until well after it's UK release early next year.

Sadly we also came across two dead turtles, an adult washed up on the beach with no obvious signs of death other than a cut on its tail, and a juvenile with obvious propeller damage to its carapace, and a third turtle that was severely emaciated and lethargic, probably dying, cause unknown.

It was as if these turtles were there to remind us that all is not well with the ecosystems in which they live.

All the film-makers made donations to IPSTCG, which we hope will go towards financing further turtle research in the Bowen area.

Stranding incidents raise concern about boat strikes

A report was received on the Marine Stranding Hotline at 10:30 on 05/07/03 of a dead turtle on the beach at Rowes Bay, Townsville.

The animal was subsequently confirmed to be an immature green turtle (curved carapace length 64.6cm). On necropsy it appeared that this was a healthy animal before it died. The carapace had two breaks across it consistent with being hit by a propeller with a blade width of about 40cm (a fairly large propeller).

Sadly this is not the only instance where there appears to be compelling evidence of the boat strike risk that faces turtles foraging in coastal waters.

Last November another turtle with severe damage to the carapace was reported washed up on the Strand. It was subsequently recovered by QPWS staff who determined that the breaks were consistent with being struck by a boat propeller. (See photo below).

In many stranding incidents, including several in the Townsville area over the past few months, the cause of death is less clear. And in some instances, a reported carcass may be washed away by the tide before QPWS staff reach the site.

Nevertheless the accumulation of stranding records is building up a set of data that may



The green turtle above, recovered on the Strand by QPWS Townsville staff on 24/11/02, had breaks in the carapace that are consistent with being struck with a vessel propeller.

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lead to more effective conservation measures for threatened marine species, including turtles.

There are also rare but happy occasions where a stranded animal may be rescued and returned safely to the wild.

Calls about stranded marine wildlife including alive or dead turtles, whales and dugong, can be reported to the Marine Strandings Hotline on 1300 360 898.

Turtle rehabilitation – not in Townsville any more?

What options exist when Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service officers in Townsville respond to a reported turtle in distress?

“With no rehabilitation facilities they are faced with two choices: they either euthenase the turtle or they return it to the water and let it take its chances,” said IPSTCG President Tim Harvey, in a recent radio interview on ABC North Queensland.

In the course of his conversation with the ABC’s Ian Hill, Tim Harvey drew attention to the loss of a third option.

Previously, an ill or injured turtle could be given a chance of recovery in the safety of the Townsville Reef HQ aquarium, before returning to the wild. Small tanks on the roof of the aquarium building, which had been set up earlier for a research project, were available for this purpose and tours of the rehabilitation facility were very popular with aquarium visitors.

These tanks were removed when the aquarium was refurbished and have not been replaced. As a result the Reef HQ aquarium is unable to temporarily accommodate a turtle in need of short term veterinary care. No other suitable place is available in Townsville.

Public pressure, suggested Tim, might be effective in raising this matter as a priority at Reef HQ. At the conclusion of the interview he encouraged Townsville residents to contact Reef HQ with their views.