



THE INDO-PACIFIC SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION GROUP NEWSLETTER

April/May 2002

Welcome to the first newsletter of 2002 and what promises to be an exciting year for IPSTCG. The hard work that many members have put in over the last couple of years is starting to bare fruit.

The Natural Heritage Trust/Coastcare grant we received in 2001 allowed us to appoint a part-time Project Officer, monitor nesting behaviour on several beaches around Townsville over the summer, expand our public awareness program and begin our school visits. A report by Karen Bolles (Project Officer), on these important initiatives is included in this newsletter. We have recently heard that we have been successful in obtaining another Coastcare grant for 2002/3 to allow us to continue this important work.

Our continued involvement, in partnership with Environment Australia, in the Coral Sea island monitoring project goes from strength to strength. Some great news is that we have been granted a permit to continue this work for the next 5 years. An article by Mark Hallam, the coordinator for this project, of the monitoring in December 2001, gives an idea of what it is like to be a volunteer on this exciting adventure. Several volunteers returned in March 2002 to the Coringa-Herald Island Group to check hatchling success rates.

In early April, 15 IPSTCG members revisited the nests on our regularly monitored beach at AIMS on Cape Cleveland, to see how many eggs had hatched. Sadly the success rate was not good. The poor success rate at this beach and at Coringa-Herald appears to be indicative of many nesting sites along the Queensland coast this year. We can only hope it is not part of a long term trend.

We have been extremely busy on other fronts. Dr Mark Read gave a very well attended talk at JCU in March on the plight of sea turtles. This was the first of what we hope will become regular bi-monthly talks on turtle related topics. Our long awaited website is currently under development and we are hoping that it will soon be up and running.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone for the hard work they have put in over the last couple of years. IPSTCG is a volunteer organization and relies on the enthusiasm and energy of people who are concerned enough about the plight of sea turtles to actually do something about it. These ever-willing volunteers have carried the Group and the present committee owes them a tremendous debt of gratitude. I hope we can carry IPSTCG forward into the next phase of the fight to secure the future of sea turtles in the Indo-Pacific.

Tim Harvey (President)

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Coral Sea Island Monitoring Trip Report by Mark Hallam

IPSTCG has been involved with monitoring green sea turtle nesting in the Commonwealth's Coral Sea Reserves for a number of years. On Thursday night, 6th of December, this year's six volunteers met in Townsville to discuss the monitoring program in detail. Having driven to Cairns, we departed at 6pm on the 10th of December on the Australian Customs Vessel "Dame Roma Mitchell". Our destination was North-East Herald Islet, some 200 nautical miles east of Cairns, in the Commonwealth's "Coringa-Herald National Nature Reserve".



Tagging a Green Turtle

The first night we recorded 51 encounters and applied 31 new tags. Fifteen turtles that had been tagged in previous years (Inter-Seasonal Returns or ISRs), came ashore and we encountered five turtles that had been recorded earlier that night. For the volunteers, this was exciting and certainly made previous nights out on mainland beaches, with only one, and sometimes no turtles coming up a night, very rewarding.

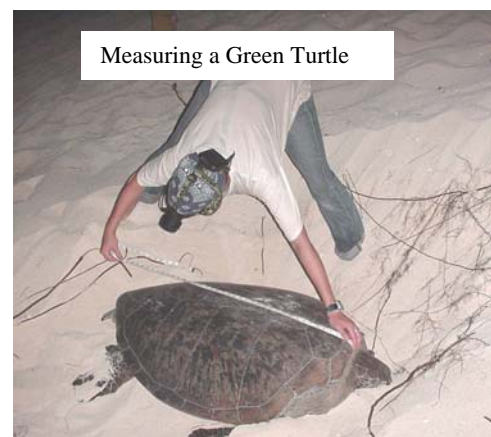
On this patrol we also trialed a new method to indicate that a turtle had been met previously. Adhesive paper stick-on labels were stuck onto the middle of the carapace of a turtle, once she had been tagged or recorded, to indicate to others that it had been observed and/or tagged already. Later, the date the sticker was applied, and the tag number of the turtle were written on the label, to allow for quick recording and to minimise any interference. A number of labels surprisingly remained on the turtle for up to 3 nights, and were considered a most successful innovation. By the end of the second night's patrolling, all our volunteers had become "experienced" turtle taggers.

In summary, we placed new tags on 214 turtles, had 101 ISR encounters and had 378 "Within Season Return" (WSR) encounters. Some of the ISR and WSR turtles came up on a number of different nights, usually as a result of the sand being very dry.

Many turtles were seen body pitting in a number of locations on the same night, and many abandoned their egg chambering efforts as the surrounding dry sand kept refilling the chambers as soon as they were dug. Overall though, a number of successful nests were dug, and we managed to do clutch counts for 11 of them, and these were marked with flagging tape and a post. Three of these nests were relocated to a "nursery area" near the campsite, because the turtles had dug their nests below or near the high tide mark on the beach.

We arrived back in Cairns at 8am on the 21st of December, and departed for Townsville the following morning.

(Some IPSTCG members returned to the Islet in March to re-dig the marked nests to get an estimate of hatching success. A further report will be in the next newsletter.)



Measuring a Green Turtle

Coastcare Report by Karen Bolles

In May 2001, IPSTCG received a Coastcare/National Heritage Trust grant for \$9,820 to fund a project involving both community education and research/monitoring.

Community Involvement

On August 12th 2001, an IPSTCG stall was run at the Centenary of Federation celebrations at Picnic Bay, Magnetic Island. Information on the upcoming community monitoring program and sea turtle fact sheets were dispensed. Good public contact was established at this very well attended event.



Since early November 2001, IPSTCG has focused on giving informative talks to public volunteers and local community conservation groups. These talks gave an introductory overview on such topics as sea turtle biology, track recognition and sea turtle conservation in Queensland. Well over one hundred people attended these talks. IPSTCG has had three newspaper articles published in the Townsville Bulletin and the Magnetic Times. These articles focused on IPSTCG and sea turtles in the Townsville region.

Educational slide presentations have been designed by IPSTCG for lectures at Townsville and Thuringowa schools. The presentation for secondary schools is an MS-Power Point slide show. The presentation for primary schools will consist mainly of a slide show with other hands-on educational materials such as turtle scales (scutes) and skulls. In October 2001, IPSTCG contacted several local schools offering to give talks. The response was positive and talks have already been given to Kirwan State High School and Cathedral School students. We plan to expand this program during the coming year.

Another addition to the community awareness component of our project will be a new IPSTCG information brochure. We are currently awaiting final proofs from the printer. We expect the brochure will be ready for distribution by May 2002.

Monitoring

IPSTCG has monitored the beach at the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) during the nesting season (November to March). Approximately 35 people were involved with IPSTCG monitoring over 18 nights at AIMS beach, with an average of 8 people per night. An estimated 123 volunteer hours were worked. Six Flatback turtles and five Green turtles were seen, and five of these were tagged. Thirteen nests were observed and a total of thirty-eight tracks noted.

In addition to the direct monitoring that IPSTCG performed, we also had local community groups, businesses and public volunteers who helped us monitor various other local beaches. For example, on Magnetic Island Adrenalin Jet Ski has been helping IPSTCG by monitoring four beaches. Magnetic Island Sea Kayaks have also reported tracks in several bays. A CVA/GreenCorps team has also helped IPSTCG monitor on Magnetic Island, the Northern Beaches and Cape Pallarenda. Final figures for these sites are yet to be collated.

An MS-Excel spreadsheet has been developed for data entry and analysis. In addition, an MS-Access database is being developed and will be ready for the 2002-2003 nesting season.

World Watch Turtle News by Alice Hurlbatt

TED'S NOW LAW IN KENYA - The campaign by conservationists against trawling in Kenya has scored a success as TEDs (turtle exclusion devices) are now legally required under the Fisheries Act for all trawling in Kenyan territorial waters. A specially convened Kenyan task force is in the final months of conducting research on trawling and its ecological and socio-economic impacts. The results of this research are scheduled to be put before stakeholders in a meeting in June of this year for a decision on whether trawling should be allowed to continue in Kenyan waters and if so under what conditions.

Source: Richard Zanre - Project Coordinator, Watamu Turtle Watch

MISSION BEACH TRAWLING CLOSURE OVERTURNED - Mission Beach, Queensland. Federal Environment Minister Dr. David Kemp succumbed to pressure from the commercial fishing lobby, and overturned his previous decision to close the Mission Beach trawl fishery. The area closed was drastically reduced and the ban now excludes Rockingham Bay - the large bay immediately north of Hinchinbrook Island, which includes Goold Island. The decision came less than two weeks after The Humane Society International (HSI) wrote to Dr. Kemp congratulating him on his decision to ban trawling in the area. In their media release Sunfish Deputy Chair and environmental coordinator, Vern Veitch passed on the message that Dr. Kemp must now accept responsibility for all future trawl by-catch incidents within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. However, in the HSI media release Dr Kemp committed to extending the ban if it was deemed necessary to avoid further problems of fish kills impacting on the local communities.

Source: HSI and Sunfish Media Release

Locally.....

Boat Strike Issue - IPSTCG has joined forces with the Local Marine Advisory Committee (LMAC) to come up with practical solutions to the problem of boat strikes on turtles in the Cleveland Bay area. There is a lack of data on movement, population structure and distribution of sea turtles. It has therefore been proposed to address this paucity by seeking funding to determine abundance, and spatial utility of foraging resources. Radio tracking turtle movements could lead to the development of models giving a clearer picture of where and when turtles are most likely to be at risk of boat strikes. IPSTCG hopes to work with the recreational and commercial boating community to raise awareness of the issue and implement solutions such as "Go Slow" zones.

National Media Coverage - Our funding agency, Coastcare, is co-sponsoring a national tour of a vessel – "*The Windward Bound*". This ship will be in Townsville on Sunday 21st and Monday 22nd April at the Reef HQ wharf. IPSTCG will have a stand nearby and we are hoping to cash in on the national media coverage involved in this event. We are looking for keen members who may be able to put in a couple of hours on either day to give out leaflets and help promote IPSTCG. If you are able to help, please contact Sara Townsend on Sara.Townsend@jcu.edu.au

T-Shirts - We are currently investigating getting some T-shirts and other merchandise printed with the IPSTCG logo. We will let you have more news about this as soon as possible.

Next IPSTCG Talk - The next IPSTCG talk will be at 6.30pm on Wednesday 8th May in the TESAG Seminar room TG124, at James Cook University. Nick Wynn will be giving a talk entitled "Green Turtles, Brown Boobies, Blue Skies, and a Frisbee for fun – A Coral Sea Adventure", about involvement in the Coral Sea Project. So come along and hear about the experience and find out how you can take part.