



THE INDO-PACIFIC SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION GROUP

June 2003 Newsletter

Art for Turtles' Sake at Townsville's EcoFiesta

This year EcoFiesta was held on Sunday June 1 at Queens Park, Townsville, where live music and dance performances made a festive backdrop to the many stalls presenting information about environmental issues.



J Hazel photos

A giant turtle sculpture, created by local artist Lynn Scott-Cumming (at the back on the right, in photo above) from recycled litter, was a highlight of the IPSTCG stall.

Creative youngsters from the Townsville – Thuringowa area responded to an invitation to paint their own designs on “scutes” for the turtle, and kept Lynn busy attaching them to cover the giant turtle’s “carapace”.

At the same time IPSTCG volunteers were kept busy answering questions about turtles in our local area – photo at the right.



Wednesday 2 July – Townsville Show

Don't miss the annual show! And please lend a hand at the IPSTCG stall if you can.

Friday 4 July – Happy Hour Turtle Talk

Tim Harvey will talk about turtles at Diving Dreams, 252 Walker Street, Townsville, from 6:30 pm, divers and non-divers welcome, refreshments available. Phone 4721 2500 for more details.

Sunday 27 July – Thuringowa River Festival

All day festival with the theme “Clean Up the River” – helpers needed for IPSTCG stall.

If you can offer to help, or need more info, please email IPSTCG@ballyhoo.com.au



Turtle surveys in Edgumbe Bay

Several IPSTCG volunteers (some of them in the photo below) have been involved in turtle surveys in Edgumbe Bay near Bowen recently.



The research is being conducted by Ian Bell, QPWS Senior Conservation Officer in conjunction with members of the Giru Dala Council of Elders.

The aim is to tag and measure individual turtles in order to enhance understanding of the dynamics of turtle populations in the Abbot Point Port area. Funding has been provided by Queensland Ports Corporation.



Ian Bell photos

The majority of turtles recorded so far in this study have been green turtles, as expected (photo above).

However a surprising and significant discovery was the presence of two loggerhead turtles as well. Loggerheads, whose worldwide and Queensland populations are endangered, are rarely seen and have not previously been recorded in the Bowen area.

Unlike green turtles, which feed on seagrass, loggerhead turtles are carnivores and Ian Bell suggested they would probably be feeding on molluscs in the shallow waters of Edgumbe Bay.

One of the turtles observed during the study had an injury, which appeared to have been caused by a boat strike. Ian Bell appealed to local boat operators to travel slowly and watch out for turtles and other marine life.

The QPWS slogan is a timely reminder: “Go Slow for those below”.

Raine Island in winter

Remote, windswept Raine Island is a major green turtle nesting site that is occasionally visited by researchers during the humid heat of summer when turtles are breeding. Winter is very different, as QPWS Senior Conservation Officer, Ian Bell, recounts.

For the last three days on Raine Island the squalls blew hard in from the south-east, the trade winds. The winds gusted, sometimes at up to 25 knots, and when the squalls came the rain blew in horizontal and colder than the air. Then the squall would pass away out to sea, the sun would break through the clouds and the heat would return.

Raine Island is a speck of coral and sand one hundred and fifty kilometres south of the tip of Cape York, eleven degrees south of the equator. From Cairns it takes almost two days to get there by boat. The island is at the very outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef, to the east is the Coral Sea; some six hours to the west is the tip of the Australian continent. It's minuscule, just over 800 metres long and 400 metres wide at high tide, but its significance is far greater than its size.

This is one of the most important sea bird breeding sites along the entire two thousand kilometre length of the Great Barrier Reef. Perhaps of even more significance, Raine Island is the largest nesting ground for green turtles remaining in the world.

In the summer turtles come ashore in their thousands to lay their eggs, and for many turtles the return to Raine Island means death – death on the

island from exhaustion and heat or death in the sea from the tiger sharks, who in their turn will come to Raine to feast. But that is in the future, or so I hope.

This winter trip to Raine was to film the birds that use the island: the frigatebirds and the boobies, the terns and the common silver gull, as well as the red-tailed tropic bird and the white-capped noddy. They all breed in the winter, some amongst and even in the upturned shells of turtles which died the previous summer.

The sky above Raine Island seems always full of circling and soaring birds. The frigatebirds seem to be on sentry duty near the tower, obviously revelling in the updraft through the open middle. Masked boobies soar there too, and seem curious of us. For a while they rest in the air looking at us, then as if deciding we are of no obvious concern they move away, on the wind and the wing.

The frigatebirds are pirates, without scruples. Sometimes they pounce on their prey individually, other times it seems that they work in gangs, darting down on streamlined wings from the blue of the sky to harry some poor bird so it will regurgitate its meal.

In between Raine Island and the Australian mainland are some of the myriad reefs and cays that make up the whole of the Great Barrier Reef. The waters here are dangerous to those who don't know them. In the waters beneath the boat we are on, an old Admiralty anchor was seen, perhaps over forty or fifty metres down. Perhaps long ago it was lost by some ship unknown to us, and in the waters of the reef many ships have come to grief and foundered.

Humans seem to have no place in the vastness of the ocean, yet it was crossing the ocean which, more probably than not, brought humanity to Australia first. And then humans have crossed oceans since to come again and again to Australia, convicts, the mass of immigrants from the war torn and starved Europe of the 1950's and 1960's, me included; the boat people of the 1970's from war



Raine Island

EPA Photo

ravaged Viet Nâm as well as Laos and Cambodia. Now they still come from over the seas, on leaky vessels that we call SIEV's. And we will never know how many never made it, human flotsam lost on the seas of politics and war.

The sea has always attracted humans, and humans have also come to Raine – the first recorded sighting was by the captain of HMS Surrey in 1815, a young English naval officer called Thomas Raine. But long before that the Aboriginal people from Cape York sailed out in canoes for bêche-de-mere and trepang; islanders from the Torres Strait had come to Raine for the fishing, and Indonesians as well, sailing as they refer to it, 'below the wind'.

And long before them, Raine had been a limestone hilltop at the edge of a much larger Australian continent, and perhaps one day with global warming may disappear altogether.

But it was the Europeans who left their mark on the island. In 1844 convicts were transported to the island to build a tower from limestone hewn from the island, and it still stands at the eastern edge of Raine. It was built as a beacon to warn shipping of the dangers of the reef. Now it stands as a reminder of those days before GPS and satellite navigation.

Another reminder of humans is the solitary grave of Annie Ellis who died in 1891 when the island was being mined for guano, and remnants of walls built in those days.

Now very few humans visit Raine Island. It is too remote, and it is protected by Queensland legislation. Indeed, we will be the last film crew permitted to land on the island for the foreseeable future.

We got what we came for in the winter, the birds nesting, no sign at all of the Tiger Sharks and only a few foraging Green Turtles. But already the turtles that will come ashore to nest in summer have made their decision, already they are heading with some unknown instinct towards Raine Island, navigating with precision through troubled waters.

Perhaps already the tiger sharks are waiting to depart from unknown waters and to arrive in the vicinity of Raine.

Already the die is cast and inexorably the characters are drawn towards Raine.

The footprints that we left in the sand will already be erased. Our coming and our leaving were of no importance whatsoever for the animals that live on Raine. But our presence is felt by them, by all of them, everywhere.

Working towards cleaner seas

IPSTCG volunteers turned out on Saturday May 31 for the third of our clean up operations, which are supported by Zodiac and Coastcare.

A sunken road safety cone and a large pillow were among the unusual pieces of litter collected. But once again, the garbage tally was dominated by plastic bags.



Sara, Sarah and Tim unload garbage collected in Ross Creek by IPSTCG volunteers

The two and a half hour cleanup of the Strand, Breakwater Marina shoreline and Ross Creek produced 20 large bags of garbage and about 2500 items were noted in a record of quantities and types of litter found. These details will contribute to a report for the Townsville City Council and a WWF national database that aims to identify major sources of the litter that threatens marine life. Drifting plastic and discarded pieces of rope and fish net pose serious threats to turtles, dugongs, whales, seals and other marine animals.

Local reports: one turtle got away, three died

On June 3 a tour operator reported to Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service that a turtle was caught on one of the permanent drum lines set for shark control off The Point at Horseshoe Bay, Magnetic Island. It was subsequently released successfully, and swam away.

Other recent reports to Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) paint a sad picture, with three turtle deaths within the past

month. On May 20, the carcass of an immature turtle was found floating in Gladstone Harbour. Some blue netting was stuck to the remains of the front left flipper, but it was impossible to tell whether the animal had been caught in a net or the carcass had drifted into floating debris after death from some other cause.

On 22 May a large dead turtle was reported about 80 metres east of the northern-most lead into Townsville Harbour. It was floating plastron up and appeared to have a cut along the side of the skull and the edge of the plastron was broken.

On 23 May the carcass of a 60 cm green turtle was found on the shore about 50 km north of Townsville but no cause of death could be determined.

What is the significance of three dead turtles, one may wonder?

Research indicates that only a small fraction of turtle carcasses are ever reported. Estimates suggest a range of 7 – 14%. Therefore reports of three dead turtles could mean between 21 and 42 turtles actually died, the majority unseen and unrecorded.

Sources: Reports from stranding hotline, GBRMPA; Mortality estimate from Epperly, SP, Braun, J, Chester, AJ, Cross, FA, Merriner, JV, Tester, PA & Churchill, JH, 1996, Beach strandings as an indicator of at-sea mortality of sea turtles, *Bulletin of Marine Science*.

Reef protection plan released for comment

On June 2 the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority released their draft rezoning plan for public comment. The period for comment runs until August 4.

IPSTCG will contact members in July with further information on making a submission about the draft RAP zoning plan.

Currently, only 4.6% of the Reef is highly protected as a marine sanctuary. The draft plan proposes to increase protection to 32.5%. While recognizing this welcome improvement in protecting biodiversity, many have already spoken out on the urgent need to provide greater protection to threatened GBR ecosystems.

Information and contact details for commenting on the draft zoning plan can also be found at:

www.gbr.wwf.org.au