



THE INDO-PACIFIC SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION GROUP NEWSLETTER

September/October 2002

Once again we are entering the busiest part of the year – the nesting season - when we need as many volunteers as possible. We will be monitoring several beaches in the area as well as the Coral Sea. In addition, we will be running a turtle-monitoring workshop, where you can learn how to recognise turtle tracks, and how to measure and tag a turtle. If any of you are interested please contact us as soon as possible so that we have an idea of numbers. We will let you have further information about nesting activities as soon as details have been finalised.

A round-up of events since the last newsletter. The RAPs process went smoothly and GBRMPA were extremely pleased with the response. A big thanks to all who sent submissions. We await the outcome with interest. The report on the 2001/02 nesting season will shortly be sent to Coastcare and the public report is in final edit, shortly to be sent to management agencies and stakeholders. If you would like a copy please let us know if you want an electronic or paper version and we will send it as soon as we can. Ian Bell gave an entertaining talk in August. Attendance was slightly disappointing and we are taking steps to notify people earlier of our talks. It is worth attending talks as you will meet the people responsible for hands-on turtle research and it is a good way to become a volunteer. I gave a talk to the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ) in September, and submitted an article to their newsletter.

C4, a community group at Mission Beach, have asked us to run a turtle-monitoring workshop for them. C4 carried out monitoring last nesting season and the workshop will enable them to become more involved. We are looking forward to expanding our monitoring program further along the coast and would like to see the workshop duplicated at other beach communities to help us gain a better picture of turtle activity along the N Queensland coast.

Another celebration! We received \$5,000 from Zodiac to help us conduct a clean-up operation in Cleveland Bay. Rubbish is a problem as turtles ingest it thinking it is food and can become entangled in it. We will be collecting rubbish in several spots around the Bay over the coming year, to find out where it comes from and to raise awareness in the community about this problem. We will be looking for volunteers to help, and will let you have details as soon as possible.

We have nearly sold out of several sizes of T-Shirts and Polo shirts. If you would like to order a shirt please let us know ASAP, otherwise colour and size choice might soon get limited.

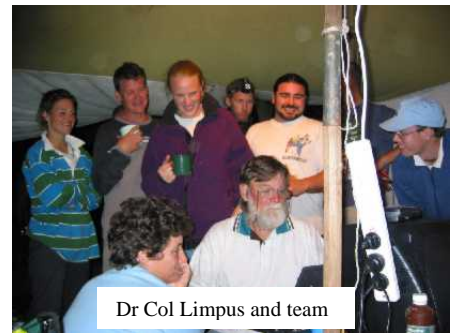
Tim Harvey (President)

In this issue:

- Shoalwater Bay Dugong and Turtle Trip – by James Sheppard
 - Turtles that nest on local beaches
 - World Watch turtle news and Local issues and Activities
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Shoalwater Bay Dugong and Turtle Trip – by James Sheppard

In June/July of this year I was fortunate enough to be able to conduct satellite tagging of wild dugongs in Shoalwater Bay as part of my research into dugong movement patterns and herbivory at James Cook University. Shoalwater Bay is a large estuarine area located in the southern section of the GBRMPWHA, about 150 kms north of Rockhampton. Because the area has been reserved for defence force training since 1965 there is relatively little human disturbance, such as the coastal development so prevalent on much of Australia's East Coast. As a consequence, the region remains a scenically stunning, largely intact natural system. The Shoalwater Bay Area supports the most important dugong habitat in the GBR region south of Cape York and is the 3rd largest class-A DPA in the GBRWHA. The region is also considered the most important seagrass resource in the southern part of the GBR Marine Park and supports large populations of dugongs and green turtles.



Dr Col Limpus and team

James Sheppard with juvenile Green turtle



My dugong-tagging team entered the Bay under the aegis of Dr Col Limpus of QPWS who has maintained a turtle-monitoring program in the area for over a decade. In return for assistance capturing wild dugongs we gratefully helped QPWS with the capturing, processing and return of turtles. This involved securing the animals “rodeo” style and towing them back to basecamp where they could be measured, sexed, tagged and their breeding status determined via laparoscopy. The turtles were then returned unharmed to the sea. Capturing 180kg turtles at speed can be a difficult and risky process (hard shells, barnacles and humans are a bad mix), nevertheless, an average of 50 animals a day were successfully caught and processed for the two weeks of the operation.

The turtle surveys contribute important information on the population status and fecundity of the animals in the region for improvement of management policies and practices. At present, the data collected over the lifetime of the surveys seem to indicate that although the region still supports a large and relatively stable population of green turtles, the current levels of turtle fecundity cannot compensate for the overall decline in their population numbers as a result of anthropogenic mortality - a scenario sadly common to most of the turtle populations of Australia. Much more research and a greater general awareness of the threats facing the species is required if we are to successfully promote, enhance and ultimately secure the conservation of the turtles of Shoalwater Bay, and indeed, the whole of the Indo-Pacific region.



IPSTCG Secretary Alice Hurlbatt with a juvenile Green turtle

First Flatback turtle of the season?

A Flatback turtle ventured on to the Strand on Tuesday 22nd October (last week) to try to nest. Apparently she crossed the road leading down to the marina. Police were called to manage traffic and QPWS attended.

Our Local Sea Turtles

With the sea turtle nesting season about to begin, we thought that we'd provide a brief synopsis of the turtles that you may see nesting on our local beaches.



Photo Courtesy of Environment Australia

Flatback Turtle (*Natator depressus*)

Conservation status: Vulnerable

Adults have a distinct low-domed flat carapace, with upturned edges which is covered in skin, about 0.9m in length; olive grey flippers and head; and white plastron. Hatchlings have a grey carapace and white plastron. Flatback turtles are carnivorous, feeding mainly on benthic soft-bodied invertebrates (soft corals, sea pens, holothurians) and jellyfish.

As far as we know, Flatback turtles are endemic to the continental shelf of Australia. They prefer shallow, sub-tidal, soft littoral seabed habitats away from reefs. They feed mainly inshore of the outer GBR, from Hervey Bay to the Torres Strait; the Gulf of Carpentaria; the NW shelf; the Arafura Sea and the Gulf of Papua. Hatchlings are unique in not having an oceanic pelagic phase. Tag returns have shown movement of 1300 kms between foraging and nesting areas in Indonesia and Australia. Nesting occurs between late November and early February in three main areas: The Kimberley region of W Australia, inshore islands and mainland beaches from Bundaberg to Mackay, and offshore islands and mainland beaches of the northern GBR and Torres Strait. Hatchlings emerge from late December to late March.



Photo courtesy of QPWS

Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)

Conservation status: Internationally – Endangered
Nationally - Vulnerable

Adults have smooth, high-domed carapaces which are olive green with occasional brown, reddish-brown or black mottling of about 1.0 m in length. Hatchlings have a black carapace with white margins, white flippers and plastron.

Green turtles are found in tropical, subtropical and temperate waters around the world. They occur in seaweed rich, subtidal and intertidal coral and rocky reefs and seagrass meadows in the Indo-Pacific region. Immature green turtles are carnivorous. As adults they are principally herbivorous, feeding mostly on algae, seagrass, mangrove fruit and jellyfish. Nesting occurs between October and February in 4 main areas in Australian waters: Southern GBR (13 major rookeries), northern GBR (5 major rookeries), Gulf of Carpentaria, and NW shelf (widely spread major rookeries). Small numbers also nest on the National Nature Reserves in the Indian Ocean. Based on tagging evidence, green turtles nesting in Australia migrate from Indonesia, Gulf of Carpentaria, Arnhem Land, Torres Strait, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. The proportion of green turtles nesting each year varies considerably and is influenced by variations in the El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO). They are the only species of marine turtle for which this has been shown and it may be based on nutrition.

World Watch Turtle News by Sara Townsend

CUBAN PROPOSAL TO DOWNLIST HAWKSBILLS WITHDRAWN - Cuba decided to withdraw their proposal to sell their stockpile of hawksbill shell from consideration by the 12th Conference of the Parties to CITES (November 3-15, 2002).

Source: Marydele Donnelly – Ocean Conservancy

PERMIT DENIED FOR CONSTRUCTION OF 180 CONDOMINIUMS ADJACENT TO LAS BAULAS NATIONAL PARK COSTA RICA - The National Secretariat of the Environment (SETENA) did not approve the Environmental Impact Study submitted by "Ecocondominiums Playa Grande Estates" to construct 180 luxury condominiums in Playa Grande, as it would jeopardize the fragile ecosystem that endangered nesting leatherback sea turtles depend on. The presence of 180 homes close to the nesting beach would create problems with light and noise and would alter natural leatherback nesting patterns. "Now we must concentrate our efforts on consolidating Las Baulas National Park and making sure that these resolutions are respected", said Randall Arauz of the Sea Turtle Restoration Project, Costa Rica. "Just early this week, obviously without any permits, Playa Grande Estates had already cut down over 20 trees and started clearing land. Its up to the Costa Rican people to watch-dog these activities, and demand enforcement of environmental regulations, so these critical habitats may be protected for future generations".

Source: Randall Arauz - Sea Turtle Restoration Project, Costa Rica

VICTORY! US COURT SUPPORTS SEA TURTLE PROTECTION - Each year, thousands of sea turtles are caught accidentally in Atlantic pelagic longlines - fishing lines up to sixty miles long with thousands of hooks targeting species such as swordfish and tuna. Oceana's legal team has won an important battle in their efforts to protect sea turtles. In late September, a federal judge banned pelagic longline fishing gear from a large area in the North Atlantic in order to protect an important sea turtle migration and feeding area. Pelagic longline fishing jeopardizes the continued existence of leatherback and loggerhead sea turtles. This summer, more than 110,000 members of the public signed on to Oceana's petition demanding that the National Marine Fisheries Service implement a program to count, cap, and control wasted catch. This is the largest number of people ever to comment formally to the U.S. government on an ocean related issue.

Source: Vincent Saba - Virginia Institute of Marine Science

Locally.....

Monitoring Workshop – Our local monitoring effort will begin in November and we will be requiring volunteers to join us down at AIMS beach on Friday and Saturday nights through to Christmas. We have had reports of nesting turtles on the beach already. We will be holding a monitoring workshop sometime on the weekend of **10th November**. You will receive more details by email.

Coral Sea Trip – Thanks to all those who responded to our call for volunteers for the Coral Sea trip. We are currently negotiating with Environment Australia and the Customs vessel for final dates to enable us to complete our planning and will be in touch soon.

Project Officer – We are in the process of appointing a Project Officer to coordinate this season's monitoring and education program. The Project Officer will be in touch with you all about volunteer help that will be required during the coming months.

Zodiac grant – We have been awarded a new grant from Zodiac (the rubber boat people) that will enable us to conduct a clean-up operation in Cleveland Bay. The dates for the first clean-up day will be over the weekend of the **16th and 17th November**. There will be substantial media publicity and Zodiac will be supplying some T-shirts for this event. Please reserve a few hours to help if you can.