

Western Cape York Turtle Conservation Project

Report from Camp Alpha-Janie Creek 29th August-3rd September 2004

The first of the Turtle Conservation Project's two trial camps was held over six (6) days from the 29th August. The camp saw Traditional Owners, Mapoon Council, Rangers, Qld National Parks and Wildlife (QNPWS), Central Qld University (CQU), Dept Primary Industries and Fisheries, Carpentaria Contracting, Unique Adventures, Tourism Queensland (TQ), Western Cape Campus and Weipa Rent A Car work collaboratively to create an eco tourist and cultural experience for visitors from both Sydney and Devonport.

Community members and representatives from Qantas Link and Comalco also visited camp 'Alpha'. Similar visits to Camp 'Bravo' in late October will also be encouraged and arranged through the Land and Sea Office. Rik Allen the Coordinator facilitated the visits for a broad range of Traditional and Historical Owners. The visits were appreciated by the visitors and proved an integral part of the tourist experience.



Zoë De Jersey looking on as Duncan Limpus (QNPWS) explains the biology of a newly hatched endangered Olive Ridley marine turtle



Very much part of the tourist experience was Zoë De Jersey demonstrating the art of palm leaf sculpture

Flinders Beach (between Janie Creek and Pennefather River is the (Index Beach) principle research site for both the marine turtle research, monitoring and protection along with 'ghost net' identification and removal. The Mapoon Rangers, work experience student (June Barkley) and tourists worked with scientific staff from both QNPWS and CQU throughout the six days of the camp.

Ghost nets were targeted for identification and removal during daylight hours, whilst nesting turtles were monitored late afternoon and after dark. Flinders Beach had been previously marked out into one- kilometre sectors, commencing at the Pennefather River (1-24) using reflector posts for ease of identification and safety at night.

Table 1, is a brief summary of the ‘ghost net’ work conducted on the beach, with nets being sampled, identified and where practicable nets removed to areas above the current storm surge line. Trial burning of material took place, in line with current Ranger practice for the Cullen Point to Janie Creek beach. Complete removal is recommended; the action of burning in this instance was to determine the extent of residues.

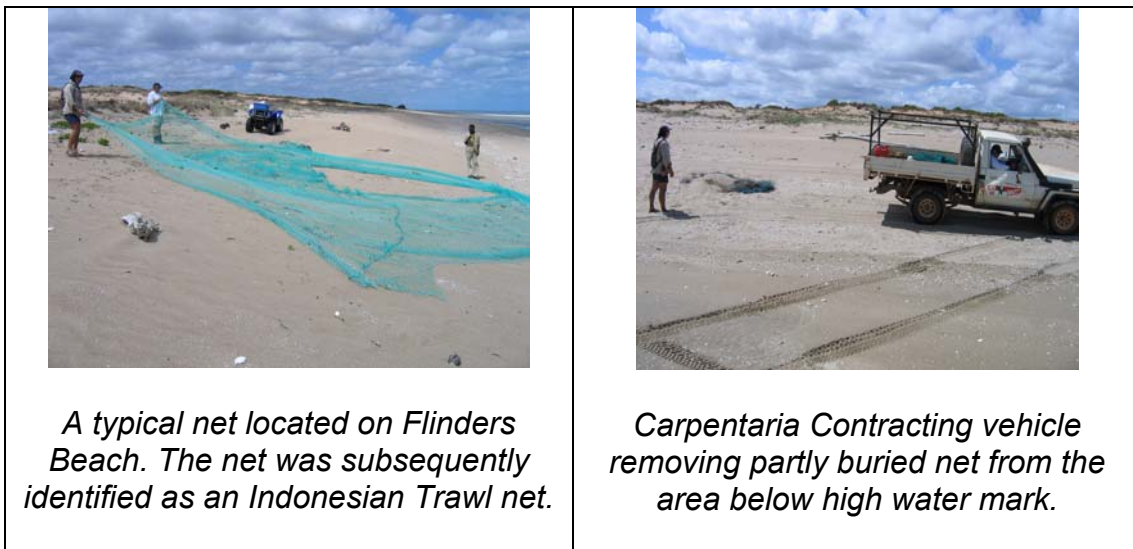


Table 1. Ghost Nets Flinders Beach Cape York

<i>Sector</i>	<i>Number of nets</i>	<i>Nets ID Known</i>	<i>Nets ID Unknown</i>
<i>5-6</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>19-20</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>20-21</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>21-22</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>22-23</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>23-24</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>2</i>

A total of 396 nets have been located on Flinders Beach, with the majority broadly falling into two categories, gillnet and trawl. Using the standard identification manual compiled by World Wildlife Fund WWF (Northern Territory) “The Net Kit-A Fishing Net Identification Guide to Northern Australia”, the majority of nets are also of foreign origin (Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Korea, China,). Four to date have been identified as Australian. It is anticipated that a further evaluation, identification and removal of nets will take place during Camp ‘Bravo’ in late October.

It is unlikely that all sectors of Flinders Beach will be net 'free' with the onset of the wet season, but there will be a large area of beach that can be evaluated for net 'returns' during the monsoons that will be clear of net, thus enabling the incidence of return nets to be quantified for the first time in this area.

More detailed reports outlining specific net identification, dimensions, country of origin and location will be furnished to the central data base collection point with WWF in the NT following Camp Bravo. (WWF, Reply Paid 1268 Darwin, NT 0801)

Similar reports will also be prepared by scientific research staff for dissemination and data inclusion in the Queensland Turtle Conservation Database. However in broad terms the following information was collected during work conducted with marine turtles on Flinders Beach over five nights. Rangers, tourists and other participants engaged in identification of turtles, tagging, measuring, weighing and assisting with multiple laparoscopies (surgical procedures).



Ranger Cecil Woodley assisting QNPWS staff with laparoscopy on Flat back turtle, camp Alpha 2004



Cecil and WCC work experience student June Barkley assist with measuring nesting Flat back turtle

Table 2, summarises the research and monitoring work conducted for the period of Camp 'Alpha'.

*Of significance to long term marine turtle monitoring in Queensland was the tagging, weighing, measuring, gene sampling and laparoscopy of the **first 'observed' nesting of an Olive Ridley in Queensland.** The same turtle returned two nights later having failed to lay a clutch of eggs. More significant was locating an 'erupted' Olive Ridley nest and return to the water by tourists and research staff of a further twelve (12) hatchlings which would have otherwise perished having been trapped in the nest. The first good quality photographs of beach nesting tracks; hatchlings and adult Olive Ridley were also taken for the first time in Queensland as a consequence.*



Olive Ridley Hatchling



Western Cape College work experience student (Ranger) June Barkley ready to release an Olive Ridley hatchling

Table 2. Research Summary for Camp 'Alpha'

<i>Primary Tagged marine turtles</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Within Season Return WSR Alpha</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Within Season Return WSR 2004</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Egg Clutches confirmed</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Egg Clutches Counted/weighed</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Clutches (hatchling) Emerged</i>	<i>3 (Flat back) 1 (Olive Ridley)</i>
<i>Turtles- Surgical Laparoscopy Result</i>	<i>17 (nested previously) 1 (new mother)</i>
<i>Animals weighed</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Turtle Remains in ghost nets</i>	<i>2 (Olive Ridley)</i>
<i>Number of nests protected FPED</i>	<i>12</i>



Senior Ranger Lawrie Booth and (tourist) Phil Beveridge assisting QNPWS Researcher Duncan Limpus with clutch count and weighing



Lawrie Booth and Ian Bell with an Olive Ridley turtle on Flinders Beach



The first recorded photo taken of a nesting Olive Ridley in Queensland



Olive Ridley Turtle returning to the water (unsuccessful egg lay) on Flinders Beach Sept 2004

Olive Ridleys nest all year round, with most nesting occurring during the dry season.

No large rookeries of Olive Ridleys have been recorded in Australia, with DEH estimating the total Australian nesting population is 500-1000 females.

Nationally the Olive Ridley's status is vulnerable, with the animal being classified as endangered here in Queensland.

QNPWS following recent monitoring, now recognises Flinders Beach as the most significant nesting site for Olive Ridleys in Queensland. Future monitoring will establish the size of the nesting population.



Ranger Geraldine Mamoose struggles to free the remains of an Olive Ridley from ghost nets on Flinders Beach August 2004

Planning will now begin for Camp 'Bravo' in late October that is fully booked (10 tourists).

Opportunities exist for further participation by Mapoon townspeople. A camp 'roustabout' to assist with general duties and a 4wd driver for beach work with tourists are two positions identified to date. Visitation by artists and crafters will be further encouraged.

Matt Brace a journalist with the Sydney Sunday Telegraph (Murdoch papers nationally) and media consultant who participated in Camp Alpha will be 'penning' an article for the newspaper network expected to appear in the next 2-3 weeks (week-end travel).

Matt Brace taking photos of the release of Olive Ridley hatchlings for the Sydney Morning Herald. Cecil and June release the hatchlings. The hatchlings and the release were the highlight of the trip for Matt.



The first tourist to gain an insight into the turtle conservation 'experience' here on the Cape as part of the Western Cape Turtle Conservation Project was Phil Beveridge proprietor of Devonport Historic Cottages (bed and breakfast). Phil became actively involved in all aspects of the camp's activities and went away with an appreciation of the threats (feral pig predation and ghost nets) facing marine turtles here on the Cape, and satisfied that he was able to contribute.



Phil with Ian Bell (QNPWS) with the Olive Ridley on Flinders Beach



Phil literally up to his elbows in turtle nest as he assists Duncan Limpus (QNPWS) and Lawrie Booth (Senior Ranger Mapoon) with egg/clutch count of Flat back nest

The Western Cape Campus encouraged June Barkley a Year 10 Marine Studies student to participate in Camp 'Alpha' as part of their work experience program (community Ranger). June has family links to the Yupungathi people, the Traditional Owners of Flinders Beach. June participated enthusiastically in all facets of the turtle monitoring and research. It is hoped that she can return in October (Camp 'Bravo') to gain a further understanding of what is entailed working as a community Ranger.

It is hoped to establish the same links with students currently engaged in tourism and hospitality.



June assisting Ranger Cecil Woodley with measuring and recording Flat back turtle



June releases Olive Ridley hatchling

Thanks to all members of the Project Team for a job well done. A thank you also to the Yupungathi and Tjungundji people for their active participation and commitment to the conservation of nesting turtles on their country.

*Peter McCulkin
Senior Project Officer (DPI & F) Weipa
6th September 2004*