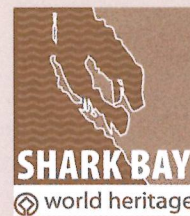
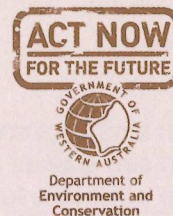


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Shark Bay World Heritage Notes



ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION DISTRICT OFFICE, DENHAM, WESTERN AUSTRALIA
SEA SNAKES

Sea snakes strike fear into the hearts of most people, but they are generally placid creatures and are much less likely to cause injury than other harmful marine creatures living in Shark Bay.

Sea snakes evolved from the terrestrial front-fanged Elapid snake family. All of Australia's venomous snakes are from the Elapid family including the gwardar (*Pseudonaja nuchalis*) and king brown or mulga snake (*Pseudechis australis*) found in Shark Bay.

Sea snakes have adapted well to life in the sea. They have valvular nostrils on the top of the snout and a flattened oar-shaped tail for swimming. They also give birth to live young as opposed to laying eggs.

Six sea snake species occur in Shark Bay, the three most common are:

- Olive-headed sea snake (*Hydrophis major*) – a stout species that grows to 1.6m, has a broad yellowish head and 24-30 wide blackened bars on its back.
- Bar-bellied seasnake (*Hydrophis elegans*) – a large species growing to 2m with a small head, the anterior two thirds of its body much thinner than the posterior third and 39-44 black bars on its back, contracting on its flanks and broadening on its belly.
- Shark Bay sea snake (*Aipysurus pooleorum*) – a patternless sea snake growing up to 1.5m. Males are brownish in colour with short keels on the dorsal scales. Females are larger, purplish in colour and do not have dorsal keels. This species is only found in Shark Bay and was named after the Poole brothers, professional fishermen who collected the first specimens in the mid-1960's

The other species of sea snakes recorded from Shark Bay are the turtle-headed sea snake (*Emydocephalus annulatus*) and the southern mud snake (*Ephalophis greyii*) which are commonly found searching for mudskippers in their burrows amongst the mangroves at low tide and the pelagic yellow-bellied sea snake (*Pelamis platura*), which is found from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of Central America.

Sea snakes prefer living in shallow water; almost all are fish eaters, the one exception being the turtle-headed sea snake which eats fish eggs.

In Western Australia, sea snakes generally occur in warm waters as far south as Shark Bay, but are not uncommon further south in winter when they are carried down the coast by the Leeuwin Current.

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When on land, sea snakes are fairly helpless as their boat-shaped abdomens restrict mobility. Beached sea snakes can appear dead but may still be venomous and capable of biting, so it is therefore advisable to avoid them.

Sea snakes' fangs are at the front of their jaws, the mouth and fangs are small, so it is difficult for them to bite and puncture a large object such as a human limb.

Sea snake venom is highly toxic, just one drop contains enough venom to kill three adults, however, venom is not always injected when the sea snake bites.

Often sea snakes can be curious and will readily approach a person in the water and even look into a diver's face mask. They are much less aggressive than land snakes and unlikely to bite unless entangled in the arms of a swimmer.

If you encounter a sea snake when swimming do not panic or splash around as there is little to fear. Observe and back off and the sea snake is most likely to swim away.

Sea snakes are protected under the Wildlife Conservation Act, so it is not legal for them to be killed or taken without a DEC permit.

First Aid Treatment

If bitten:

- Keep calm and rested. Venom is released voluntarily so you may not have had any injected into your body. Excitement or movement will spread any venom in your blood quicker through your body.
- Apply a firm, broad pressure bandage over the bite and as far above and below the bite on the limb as possible.
- Restrict and immobilize the affected limb in a splint.
- Contact the Silver Chain Nursing Post in Denham (phone 9948 1213) or the Carnarvon Hospital (phone 9941 1555) as soon as possible.