

At loggerheads

THIS winter has seen a number of baby loggerhead turtles wash up on the beach between Hillarys and Bunbury.

At least 30 have been brought in to CALM by people who found them on the coast. They are probably around six months old.

The turtles are normally only found in the warm waters of the North West. It is thought they were carried south by the Leeuwin current and washed ashore in the recent storms.

It is unusual for such a large number to be found so far south, and it's probably the first time that such a large raft of hatchlings has been seen in the Perth area since 1964.

CALM turtle expert Bob Prince said the turtles were hatchlings born last summer at nesting sites near Shark Bay and off the North West Cape.

"They would have swum out to sea after hatching and have since drifted south in the warm Leeuwin current," he said.

"The recent series of strong westerly fronts off the WA coast has blown the young turtles out of the current and on to southern beaches."

Rehabilitating

The animals will be cared for at Underwater World, until they can be returned to northern waters. Biologists at Underwater World have been assisting in rehabilitating stranded or injured marine animals for the past few years.

"The turtles should ideally be kept in a warm 22-23 degree seawater aquarium, fed fish and kept until they are at least three



Research scientist Bob Prince and young loggerhead turtles.
Photo by David Gough

years old before being released into the wild," Bob said.

Although CALM has been carrying out a marine turtle research program for the past five seasons, studying six species of turtle found off the WA coast, Bob said not much was known about west coast loggerheads.

Loggerheads grow to a shell length of 1.2 metres and weigh 140 kilograms, whereas the baby turtles brought in to CALM have a shell length ranging from 60 to 80 mm.

"They, like other marine turtles, spend most of their lives at sea, only coming to shore to nest when they reach adulthood at about 25 to 30 years of age," he said.

"The adults range widely. One turtle tagged and released at Exmouth in February 1988 was

caught 15 months later in the Northern Territory."

"Only about 300 to 500 adult female loggerheads are thought to nest in WA each year, each laying about five or six clutches of around 100 eggs each. The survival rate of hatchlings is extremely low."

Bob said a recorded decline in the loggerhead turtle population on Australia's east coast had led to further concern about WA's population.

He asked the public to report findings of dead or live specimens or sightings of live turtles at sea to the Wildlife Research Centre, Woodvale on 405 5100, or to the local wildlife officer.

He said this information would help CALM understand the current status of WA's loggerhead turtle populations.

