

TALKING TURTLE

Up to 6 000 marine turtles inhabit the waters of Shark Bay. Most are green turtles.

Congregations of turtles may be seen in Shark Bay from the end of July, although the start of the breeding season is usually later. At mating time, males cluster around and compete for individual females, which inevitably breed with more than one male. Within a short time the female lays her first eggs on the beach, repeating this on a fortnightly basis up to six or even eight times.

During summer, female green turtles lay their eggs on the white sandy beaches of Bernier, Dorre, and Dirk Hartog Islands, and occasionally at the northern tip of Peron Peninsula. This is the southern limit of green turtle nesting in Western Australia.

The loggerhead turtle, considered the most endangered turtle that nests in the Australian region, is also found in the waters of Shark Bay. At present it is estimated that only 300 to 500 females nest annually in Western Australia, predominantly between Shark Bay and Exmouth Gulf. The sandy beaches of Turtle Bay, at the northern end of Dirk Hartog Island, are among the few key nesting sites in WA. It is thought that between 10 and 20 females nest there each night at the peak of the summer season.

While as few as 300 to 500 female loggerheads are estimated to nest in WA each year, the adult female population could be three to four times this number. Individual females do not nest every year. They commonly "skip" several years, with some perhaps not returning for seven years or more.



Above: A green turtle breathing in between dives.  
Photo - Jiri Lochman



Left: Herbivorous green turtles are generally more numerous than other marine turtles, which are carnivores.  
Photo - Carolyn Thomson

Information from recreational yachtsmen and fishers, anchoring overnight in the lee shore of Turtle Bay, has indicated that loggerhead nesting was active there during the summer of 1990-1991. Other yachtsmen moored there over Easter 1991 saw large numbers of hatchlings emerge from the beach and head for the open water.

Identifying marine turtle species is easiest when the females come ashore during the nesting season. To date, the most reliable way to gain accurate identification is to take

close-up photographs and send them to CALM for confirmation.\*

The Western Australian Marine Turtle Project run by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) aims to increase knowledge of marine turtle populations in our part of the world, and of their conservation needs. Research to determine the significance of the WA nesting sites to the survival of the endangered loggerhead species is most important. This research is particularly difficult because of

the isolation of nesting sites. To date, public assistance, particularly from the recreational fishing and yachting communities, has been extremely important to researchers compiling the data.

\*Leaflets which include information on how to identify species are available to anyone who is keen to assist. For more information contact the Supervisor of the Marine Turtle Research project, Dr Bob Prince, or the Senior Technical Officer, Andy Williams, on (09) 405 5100, or staff at any CALM District Office.

# LANDSCOPE

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When European scientists first set foot on our shores they found a bewildering array of animals and plants. Péron the Explorer takes an intimate look at the French scientist whose name lives in Western Australia's newest national park. See page 20.



This tour of the Gascoyne's desert coast guides you through Shark Bay and WA's newest national park. See page 10.



Close to where the fictional Gulliver is believed to have been shipwrecked lives one of the world's oldest organisms. Lilliput's Castles, on page 34, describes the creatures and the ecosystem they have built.



Seagrass covers 3 700 square kilometres of the ocean floor around Shark Bay. Grasses of the Sea, on page 42, takes us on a journey through these underwater meadows.



At first glance, Shark Bay is dry, arid and inhospitable. But if you look more closely you discover its Hidden Treasures. See page 16.

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Green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*), the commonest turtles found along our coast, begin to congregate in the waters of Shark Bay from the end of July. The Bay is the southernmost nesting area for these long-lived animals. During summer, female green turtles lay their eggs on the white sandy beaches of Bernier, Dorre and Dirk Hartog Islands, and occasionally at the northern tip of Peron Peninsula. Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky.



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