



Getting turtles

BACK ON TRACK



Thirty-two loggerhead turtles that fell off course last year and were rescued on south-west beaches have been relocated to the State's north-west. They have begun a journey that is being followed by the dedicated team who worked to ensure their safe return to the ocean.

by Rhianna King

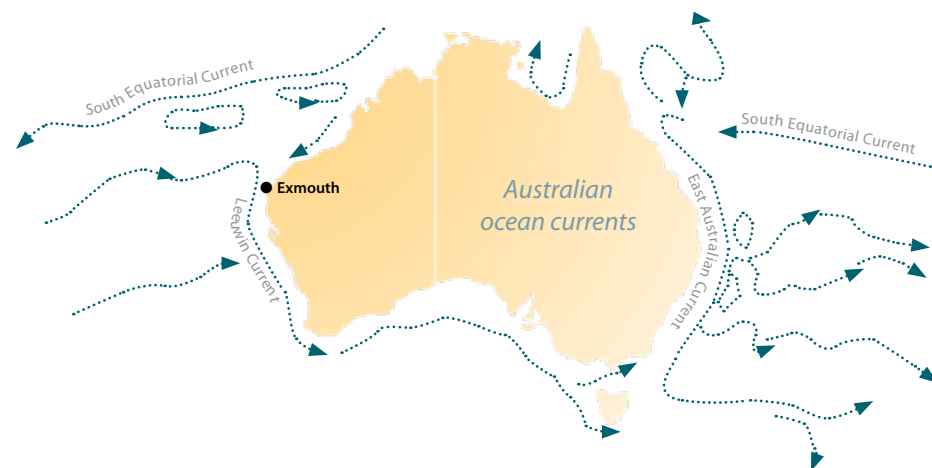


In 2017 a high number of juvenile turtles were found along WA's south-west beaches, having been pushed out of the Leeuwin current – the warm ocean current that flows south along the west coast. It is not uncommon for juvenile turtles to lose their way when the Leeuwin current meets the opposing current that runs along the southern part of Australia in summer. But storm activity last year, combined with an increased vigilance by members of the public who reported them, resulted in a higher-than-normal number of juvenile loggerhead turtles being rescued on WA beaches – 80 in total. Like those that presented before them, the animals found in 2017 were in poor condition. Some were missing flippers; others suffering from disease; and, in most cases, they were suffering from exhaustion. Almost all the turtles also presented with what's known as 'cold-water stunning', caused by the drop in temperature of the waters outside the Leeuwin current.

RESCUE OPERATION

The beached turtles have the south-west community to thank for their rescue. Beach goers found the turtles on beaches and reported them to Parks and Wildlife Service or local wildlife carers. Typically, once Parks and Wildlife Service receives a report of a sick or injured turtle through the Wildcare Helpline, wildlife officers pick up the animal and transport it to Perth Zoo, where vets assess it for its health and rehabilitation potential. Those believed to be capable of recovering are then sent to an appropriate rehabilitation centre. In this case, the turtles were sent to AQWA in Perth and the Dolphin Discovery Centre in Bunbury where they were quarantined and treated for their ailments. They spent the next few months in the specialist facilities at the centres where they were rehabilitated before being considered fit and healthy enough to be released.

The juvenile turtles rehabilitated in 2017 were found during a two-month period from mid-July. Forty-six were assessed by Perth Zoo of which 38 were rehabilitated. Upon release, these animals



ranged in weight from 1.040 to 2.365 kilograms, and in length, from 17 to 24 centimetres, and were about 10 months old.

BACK TO THE SEA

Thirty-two of the 38 loggerhead turtles were considered fit enough to return to the ocean in April 2018 (the others will hopefully be released later), so Parks and Wildlife Service wildlife officers, scientists and regional staff, and Perth Zoo vets began the involved and intricate process of planning the turtles' journey north for their release near Exmouth.

Before they were released, 14 of the turtles were fitted with radio-trackers, so their progress and whereabouts could be monitored. It is hoped this will help shed some light on the 'lost years' – the period from when turtles hatch to when they reappear to nest up to 15 years later (see also 'Tracking tides of turtles', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2016). As well as being useful for scientists, these data can also be accessed by interested members

Previous page

Main Eighty turtles were rescued in 2017 and assessed through Perth Zoo.

Photo – Jan Tierney

Background Thirty-two juvenile turtles were released off Exmouth in April.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Inset left The turtles were fitted with radio-trackers before they were released.

Inset right Members of the local community, including students from Exmouth District High School, had the opportunity to view the turtles up-close.

Above Adhesive was used to secure the radio-trackers.

Photos – Jan Tierney

of the public through www.seaturtle.org and any sponsorship funds raised through the website are distributed back to care facilities.

On 11 and 12 April, after months of rehabilitation and planning, the turtles were loaded into specially designed containers and carefully placed in the cargo hold of a



Above The turtles were flown from Perth to Exmouth, in specially designed containers, courtesy of QANTAS.

Photo – Corrine Douglas/DBCA

Above right Radio-trackers will provide information about the turtles' movements.

Photo – Dani Rob/DBCA

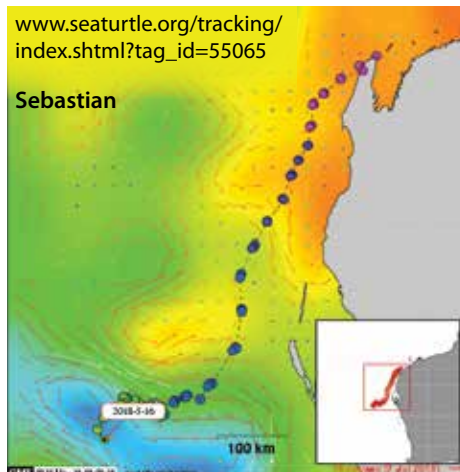
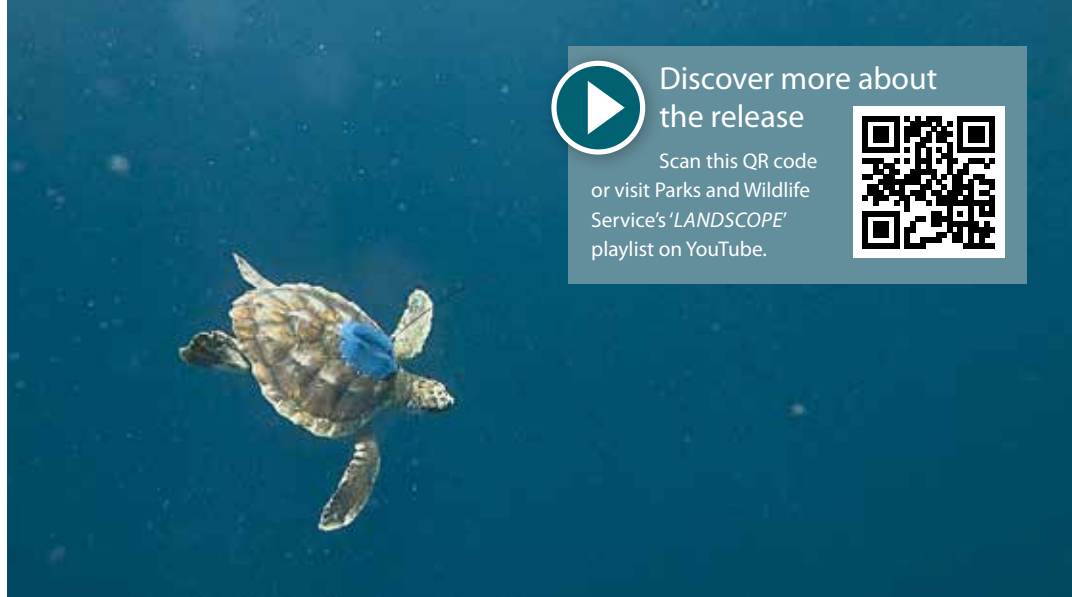
Right The turtles can be followed at www.seaturtle.org.

Below right Loggerhead turtles come to the beach to nest.

Photo – Triston Simpson

plane and flown, courtesy of QANTAS, from Perth to Exmouth. The release of the turtles generated a buzz around Exmouth, and Parks and Wildlife Service staff took the opportunity to visit Exmouth District High School to talk to the students about the health of our ocean and in particular the threat of plastics to our marine creatures.

At 10am on 12 April, officers of Parks and Wildlife Service, Bunbury Dolphin Discovery Centre and AQWA; Exmouth vet Jane Giliam; Ningaloo Turtle Program volunteers; and Exmouth District High School students and teacher boarded *Mahi Mahi* – Exmouth Dive Centre's whale shark vessel – with the turtles. They travelled 20 nautical miles offshore, where the deeper water provided the turtles the best chance for survival. The conditions were not great – a 2.2-metre swell with 18 knot south-easterly winds made moving around the boat difficult and impacted visibility in the water. Despite this, one after the other,



the turtles were held in the water for a moment so they could orientate themselves and then released to swim away, much to the elation of those on board the boat.

A FIGHTING CHANCE

The life of a turtle is fraught with dangerous challenges. Only one in every 1000 hatchlings will ever reach adulthood, but the 32 juveniles who were destined for a certain death now have a second chance at life and an opportunity to contribute to future generations of turtles. The data collected through programs such as this provides much-needed insight into their lives, so we can better understand their biology, and more efficiently and effectively protect them. And, with the continued support of, and interest from, the community, especially those who find and report turtles that have washed ashore, and the dedicated volunteers who help to rehabilitate them, WA's precious turtles may have a brighter future.

Loggerhead turtles

Loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*) are one of six species of marine turtles that can be found in WA waters. The species is listed as Critically Endangered under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* and ranks, along with olive ridley and leatherback turtles.

It is estimated that between 1500 and 2000 female loggerheads nest in WA each year, predominately in a narrow band in the approximately 400 kilometres between Dirk Hartog Island and the Muiron Islands. Females nest between November and February and lay clutches of between 100 and 150 eggs. Females do not necessarily nest each year and often skip several years before returning to the same site.

Hatchlings emerge between January and April when they are about 10 centimetres long. Adults grow up to a metre and weigh up to 150 kilograms. Their shell is heart shaped and is usually dark above and lighter below.



Rhianna King is a *LANDSCOPE* editor. She can be contacted by email (rhianna.king@dbca.wa.gov.au). If you encounter lost or injured wildlife, contact the *Wildcare Helpline* on (08) 9474 9055.