

Ningaloo Coast news

Summer 2012–2013

Volume 2, Issue 4

District Manager's update

Welcome to *Ningaloo Coast news*. This issue focuses on several species that reside in or visit the Ningaloo Coast World Heritage area. With the presence of rock wallabies, whale sharks, orcas, humpback whales and turtles, to name just a few, it is not surprising the area is World Heritage listed.

With the onset of summer, hot temperatures and dry conditions pose a real risk of fire. Please take extra care when out and about, and call 000 to report any smoke or fire.

Ningaloo farewells the humpbacks

Humpback whales have once again left the Ningaloo Coast on their annual southern migration to their Antarctic feeding grounds. The 2012 season again showed significant numbers of whales on the coast and in the Exmouth Gulf. Data collected by Lyn Irvine at the Centre for Whale Research shows the Gulf is an important humpback nursery, at peak times (September and October) accommodating one humpback whale per square kilometre. This is the highest density of humpback whales anywhere in the Southern Hemisphere! This data also shows that the Western Australian humpback population has increased from a few hundred to about 30,000 whales in the last 40 years.

During their time in the Gulf, calves feed from their mother. The milk helps them grow in preparation for the long trip south. The rest is also essential for humpback cows. They draw on blubber reserves to produce milk for their calves as they do not eat until they reach the Antarctic a few months later.

Thank you to Lyn Irvine from the Centre for Whale Research for providing information for this article.

Turtles are nesting

Turtles have started nesting on the beaches of the Ningaloo Coast World Heritage area and the Ningaloo Turtle Program volunteers have been out monitoring. This turtle rookery is one of the most important in the Indian Ocean for the endangered loggerhead, the vulnerable green and the vulnerable hawksbill turtles. Together they dig over 10,000 nests each year.

If you would like to learn more about turtle nesting, and hopefully see a turtle nesting, join the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) on a night-time guided turtle experience. Tours will commence in mid December at the Jurabi Turtle Centre, an educational facility located 13 kilometres from Exmouth. For bookings contact the Exmouth Visitor Centre on (08) 9949 1176.

As turtles are highly sensitive to light and movement, if you see a nesting turtle or hatchling while walking or driving on the beach please do not approach it. More information about turtles and the Turtle Watchers Code of Conduct is available at the DEC office or www.ningalooturtles.org.au/code_conduct.html.

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World Heritage and Shire of Exmouth lighthouse signs.

World Heritage update

- Shothole Canyon, in the heart of the World Heritage area, hosted the Sounds Outback (to Reef) music event. It was a great success with 200 members of the local community coming together to enjoy the evening. The World Heritage landscape was the star attraction, along with musicians Darren Capewell and Steve Pigram.
- World Heritage signage has been installed at the lighthouse, complementing the excellent signage Shire of Exmouth has already installed.
- Nominations for the World Heritage Advisory Committee have now closed. Thank you to those who submitted applications. A selection panel has assessed the applications and recommended applicants have been submitted to the state and federal Environment Ministers for approval. The appointed members will be announced following approval.
- The World Heritage feral control officer is working closely with stakeholders to reduce the impact of feral animals on our internationally significant wildlife.

For more information about the World Heritage area, please contact Chelsea Godson on (08) 9947 8014 or email chelsea.godson@dec.wa.gov.au.



The community coming together for the Shothole Canyon music event.

Stumpy, Chompy and Kinky return to Ningaloo Reef

Stumpy, Chompy and Kinky are a few of the regular whale sharks that visited Ningaloo Reef this year. The 2012 results of a collaborative research project between tour operators, DEC and ECOCEAN show that:

- Of the 235 individual whale sharks identified, 60 per cent were repeat visitors and 40 per cent were photographed at Ningaloo Reef for the first time.
- The local identity and crew favourite 'Stumpy' (A-001) was back. He has been returning to Ningaloo for 18 years.
- The other local identity 'Chompy' (A-076) was sighted again. He got his name from the numerous shark bite scars on his body.
- 'Kinky' (A-119), who has a very noticeable body misalignment, has returned on and off for 10 years.
- An unnamed whale shark (A-666) travelled from one end of Ningaloo Reef to the other five times from April to July.

Every year, the Ningaloo whale shark tour operators provide images of the sharks they swim with to DEC where they are analysed and submitted to the ECOCEAN whale shark database.

We encourage you to report all whale shark sightings (at any time of the year) to whaleshark@dec.wa.gov.au or call (08) 9949 8046.



'Stumpy' the whale shark.



'Kinky' the whale shark.

Photos – Three Islands Whale Shark Dive

The Ningaloo killer whale family

Killer whales (orcas) are also annual visitors to Ningaloo Reef during the winter months. John Totterdell at Marine Information & Research Group Australia (MIRG Aust.) has run a photo identification program since 2006 and results show that the Ningaloo family consists of up to 12 killer whales, primarily females and on occasion two or three calves. 'Alfie' is a large male who has only been sighted with the group on three occasions since 2006. This year's results showed the return of 'Cuttles' and several new individuals and calves.

Killer whales are only present for one to three weeks and their visit coincides with the arrival of newborn humpback whale calves on which they prey. All observed killer whale attacks have involved only mother and calf humpback pods, are early in the season, and are on the west side of Cape Range Peninsula. It may be their visits are timed to specifically target these unaccompanied mother and calf pods. Later in the season, the adult male humpbacks escort mother and calf pods as they make their journey south.

Thank you to John Totterdell from MIRG Aust. for providing information and the photograph for this article.

'Cuttles', first spotted in 2005, has been a frequent visitor to the Ningaloo Coast.



Black-footed rock wallabies 'captured' with remote cameras

Black-footed rock wallabies are a charismatic and important native species in Cape Range National Park. They were once widespread in WA, but due to predation by foxes and competition with goats for food and shelter, their populations have become reduced to such low levels they are listed as vulnerable; that is, rare or likely to become extinct.

DEC is conducting a long-term monitoring program with remote cameras to determine the presence of black-footed rock wallabies at sites such as Bloodwood and Mangrove Bay gorges. The remote cameras take a photo when a black-footed rock wallaby, or other animal, activates the infrared sensor. DEC staff also count black-footed rock wallabies where they are easily observed.

This type of technology and the data collected provides information about the presence of black-footed rock wallabies and introduced species. This in turn guides our management for the conservation of this vulnerable species. Fox and goat control is one of the important conservation tools to help ensure the survival of the Cape Range black-footed rock wallaby population.



Feral goats (left) and a black-footed rock wallaby (right) captured by the remote cameras.

If you would like to receive a copy of this newsletter electronically please email exmouth@dec.wa.gov.au with your contact details.

Department of Environment and Conservation

Exmouth District

22 Nimitz Street, Exmouth, WA, 6707

Phone: (08) 9947 8000

Email: exmouth@dec.wa.gov.au