

Ningaloo Coast news

Autumn 2013

District Manager's update

Welcome to *Ningaloo Coast news*. The summer season has been an unusual one, with a turtle nesting season significantly quieter than last year, and a whale shark season that seems to have started early, with large numbers seen regularly at the southern end of the World Heritage area.

While the tourist season has been relatively quiet, it is only a matter of time before the weather cools and southern visitors start to return. During the quieter summer months, local staff have focused on other priority areas, including finalising work on the new Kurrajong camp site and improving other recreational areas. Control of feral animals, particularly foxes and goats, continues in partnership with landholders, the Exmouth Shire, pastoralists and the Department of Defence.

On a final note, World Heritage-related projects are also progressing, with new signage and logos almost complete. The World Heritage Committee has been selected and members will be announced after the state government election.



Ningaloo turtle program volunteer in action at Bungelup.

Turtle monitoring results for 2012-13

The twelfth season of the Ningaloo Turtle Program is complete, with 26 Exmouth residents monitoring turtle nests over summer.

The monitoring results show that between November 2012 and February 2013 a total of 952 nests were recorded along the North West Cape between Mildura Wreck and Cape Range National Park. Of these nests, 54 per cent belonged to green turtles, 31 per cent to loggerhead turtles and 13 per cent to hawksbill turtles. This figure is much lower than the phenomenal 7,049 nests recorded last season. Some damage to nests resulted from Cyclone Narelle.

The historical nesting patterns, based on data collected over the past 12 years, show that fluctuations like this are quite normal, especially for green turtles. The value of long-term monitoring projects such as the Ningaloo turtle program gives conservation managers an understanding of these natural ebbs and flows, and highlights when there are issues within turtle populations.

For more information about the Ningaloo turtle program results please visit the website www.ningalooturtles.org.au.

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Camp hosts help out

Visitor numbers to Cape Range National Park in the Ningaloo Coast World Heritage area have increased from 132,800 in 2002 to 240,000 in 2012. Camping is in high demand. To manage this, and as outlined in the park's management plan, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) has increased camping capacity and there are now up to 139 sites in 13 campgrounds.

Assisting DEC with the management of these campgrounds, and helping ensure visitors have a positive experience, are volunteer campground hosts. DEC's Campground Host program runs in the park from March to November in conjunction with the peak tourist season when camp sites are at full capacity.

Campground hosts help with park and visitor management. This includes maintaining sites, cleaning toilets and grounds, assisting with the allocation of camp sites, sharing stories, and answering questions about fauna and flora and things to do in the World Heritage area.

Many hosts return each year and in 2012 hosts contributed more than 55,000 volunteer hours to the management of Cape Range National Park. The park's longest running hosts, Norm and Gwen Cole, will not be returning this season for the first time since 1989. They have jointly contributed more than 77,000 volunteer hours—an incredible combined estimate of 8.8 years of volunteer service! We will truly miss them and wish them all the best.

For more information about campground host opportunities or to provide feedback about the program please contact Cape Range National Park Ranger Phil Arthur at phillip.arthur@dec.wa.gov.au.



A group of campers are joined by Norm and Gwen. They have contributed more than 77,000 hours of volunteer service.

A closer look at loggerheads

Loggerhead turtles are of particular interest because the global population has reduced drastically and they are now listed as endangered. An additional tagging and monitoring program, led by turtle biologist Dr Andrea Whiting and long-term Ningaloo turtle program volunteer Colin Valentine, was conducted at a key rookery at Bungelup in Cape Range National Park. Volunteers marked the location of 37 loggerhead nests and will return in March to determine how many eggs have hatched.

There is also a significant loggerhead rookery at the southern end of the Ningaloo Coast World Heritage area and the Gnaraloo volunteer turtle monitoring program recently found an additional rookery at Cape Farquhar. These loggerhead rookeries are globally important for the health of loggerhead turtles.

Both the Ningaloo and Gnaraloo turtle monitoring programs provide an overview of the health of turtle populations in the World Heritage area. The help of volunteers is contributing to the conservation of turtles and is greatly appreciated.

Joining forces to combat feral animals

The Ningaloo Coast World Heritage area feral animal control program continues to expand with significant effort invested in:

- initiating agreements with pastoralists to assist with feral animal control on their stations
- trialling different bait types and methods for fox control
- working with the Shire of Exmouth to reduce the impact of foxes within Exmouth with positive outcomes achieved
- hosting a recent training course in Coral Bay for DEC staff and the Baiyungu Aboriginal community to develop skills and build additional capacity for land management
- working with the Department of Defence to expand the area of feral control.

These partnerships help DEC preserve the World Heritage area to ensure important species and features such as marine turtles, black-footed rock wallabies and the karst systems are not damaged by feral foxes, cats and goats.



DEC trainee Ethan Cooyou with local pastoralists.

Do whale sharks actually leave Ningaloo?

In January, Coral Bay locals were lucky enough to witness up to 25 whale sharks feeding out the back of the reef, an unusual sight considering the whale shark season does not 'officially' begin until April. There have been plenty more sightings this summer throughout the Ningaloo region posing the question, are whale sharks here all year round? These important sightings may provide researchers with vital clues about the migratory patterns of whale sharks. Please help us find out more about these creatures by reporting any whale shark sightings to Whale Shark Conservation Officer Dani Rob on 9947 8006 or whaleshark@dec.wa.gov.au.

Whale sharks are a star attraction of the Ningaloo Coast World Heritage area and the annual Ningaloo Whale Shark Festival will be held from 24 to 26 May to celebrate these amazing creatures. Come and visit the DEC interpretive display to find more information about whale sharks and the World Heritage area.



Ningaloo Reef research

The Ningaloo research program has been in place since 2005. More than 100 scientists from universities and federal agencies have worked on 45 research projects, ranging from deep sea exploration and studying the movements of whale sharks, sharks and fish, to investigating the impact of human use, such as camping, on the reef and surrounding areas.

The Ningaloo Marine Research Exposition was hosted by the Ningaloo Atlas on 22 February at the Game Fishing Club. The event saw researchers, DEC and conservation groups such as the Cape Conservation Group come together to present some of the research findings. It was a great turnout by the community with more than 80 people and resulted in some engaging discussions! If you missed the talks see the Ningaloo Atlas at www.ningaloo-atlas.org.au.

Research is continuing over the coming months with:

- DEC – investigating recruitment of coral larvae after coral spawning
- DEC and UWA – investigating fish populations with underwater video
- CSIRO – enlisting the help of local volunteers to track movement of turtles, using acoustic transmitters, and tracking the movements of sharks
- UWA – investigating movements of turtle hatchlings along Jurabi coast
- UWA – investigating movements of juvenile reef sharks
- AIMS – tagging whale sharks to investigate migration patterns.

Driving on beaches within Ningaloo Marine Park is illegal. This activity has damaging impacts on turtle nests and emerging hatchlings. A maximum penalty of \$1,000 applies. If you observe people driving on beaches within the marine park please report this activity to DEC in Exmouth on 9947 8000.

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

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