

Connecting kids to Country through turtle conservation

Submitted by Clodagh Guildea, Science Communication and Education Project Officer

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Sea Country where this work has been conducted –the Thalanyji, Nhuwala and Ngarluma people. We pay our respects to their Elders; past, present and emerging.

As the boat pulls up to the floating jetty at Thevenard Island, giggles and shouts can be heard from the shore. Excitedly jumping from the boat are a dozen young Aboriginal kids, proudly wearing their Waalitj Foundation shirts and ready for the beach in flip flops and boardies.

Suzanne Wilson, manager of the Waalitj Foundation's Onslow team, and the other carers and mentors organise backpacks and eskies full of food off the boat, while the kids point excitedly at turtles popping their heads up for breath at the surface of the turquoise waters.

Since 2019, DBCA's North West Shelf Flatback Turtle Conservation Program (NWSFTCP) has worked together with the Waalitj Foundation, an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation working to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, to facilitate an annual turtle monitoring experience at Thevenard Island for local families. Located on Thalanyji Country, the island is part of the Mackerel Islands and is located 22km from Onslow on the Pilbara coast. A hotspot for wildlife like marine turtles, sharks, dugong, rays, birds of prey and migratory birds, the families immerse themselves in nature for three days – fishing and swimming during the day and helping DBCA staff monitor nesting flatback turtles at night.

Opportunities to share stories and knowledge of wildlife, particularly turtles, occur throughout the trip as the kids engage with Country and nature alongside positive community role models and scientists.

The Waalitj Foundation Thevenard experience is one of three community engagement programs that the NWSFTCP facilitates in partnership with local organisations to engage young people with turtle conservation. By working together to co-design learning and conservation experiences, the NWSFTCP aims to connect young Aboriginal peoples with authentic and meaningful opportunities to care for Country and connect to nature.

experience each year to the Year 7 and 8 students, of which 40 per cent belong to the Thalanyji, Yindjibarndi and Banjima language groups. Since 2017 the turtle monitoring camp at Thevenard Island has supported the school's vision to give students the opportunity to enhance their local environmental knowledge and understanding, participate in service learning, work as a team, and experience new career pathways with people who work in the field of conservation.

Working together with the teachers and Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers at Onslow School, the NWSFTCP staff regularly visit the school throughout the year to maintain connection with young people and engage younger students in 'two-way science' projects and learning about turtles. This enables students to meaningfully apply their understanding during their time at Turtle Camp, and environmental advocacy collectively increases in the community.

In Roebourne (Yirramagardu), 40km east of Karratha, DBCA's NWSFTCP and West Pilbara Turtle Program (WPTP) engage with students at Roebourne District High School, where 99 per cent of students are from the Ngarluma, Yindjibarndi and Banyjima language groups. Working together with the school staff, the conservation programs have developed 'information exploration' sessions run at the school during the year, which leads to individual students electing to participate in the turtle 'tagalong experience' on Delambre Island, a flatback turtle rookery located about 40km offshore from Karratha. Working alongside staff employed from the Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation and DBCA scientists, the students participate in authentic science experiences while working on Country with community role models.

With regular communication, community presence and genuine co-design, the impact and sustainability of community engagement programs such as this can be ensured. The NWSFTCP and WPTP look forward to many more years of working together with community and ACCO partners on Thalanyji and Ngarluma Country.

The following people must be acknowledged for their significant contributions and commitment to the ongoing success of these programs:

- Waalitj Foundation staff and mentors including Suzanne Wilson, Troy Cook, Dale Kickett, Josie Janz-Dawson, Jane Hyland, Meeza Humphries, Megan D'Agostino and Sharrod Wellingham.
- Onslow School staff including principal Lisa Campbell, deputy principal Susan Buzan, Julian Tan, Rebecca Mackin, Irene Hayes, Mercedes Ralph and William Thomson.
- Roebourne District High School staff including principal Elizabeth Ritchie, deputy principal Atanas Dimitrov and Jade Fogarty.

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- DBCA Pilbara and West Pilbara Turtle Program staff including Sarah McDonald and Tim Hunt.



Above images, top, left to right: Waalitj Foundation kids arriving at Thevenard Island in November 2024, photo – Clodagh Guildea, DBCA; Waalitj Foundation youngster Ryder Elliott measures the length of a flatback turtle carapace (shell) with DBCA staff member Clodagh Guildea in 2023, photo – DBCA; Roebourne District High School students with Deputy Principal Atanas Dimitrov at Delambre Island in 2024, photo – Tristan Simpson, DBCA.

Bushfood recipe

In each issue of Yarning Time we'll share a recipe that uses bushfood. This issue's recipe comes from delicious.com.au, however, **we'd love to share your favourite**