Issue 2 July 2015

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Quick facts

- The Montebello Islands consists of 265 distinct, low lying islands
- The location of the Montebello Islands is considered to be the headwaters of the Leeuwin current
- Six species of mangroves exist on the Montebello Islands
- Never approach a whale within 100m

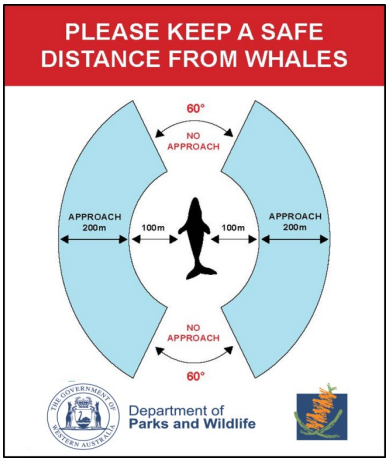
Marine park update

Ah Chong Coral Reef. Photo—Parks and Wildlife

Parks and Wildlife has had a busy six months managing the Montebello Islands Marine Park! Once the cyclone season abated in May, staff set about conducting their biennial coral and finfish monitoring including the installation of new permanent monitoring sites across the Montebellos and the deployment of long-term temperature loggers. The team then returned in June to undertake mangrove monitoring across 54 sites around Hermite Island among the extremely dense and somewhat challenging mangrove communities. The mangrove monitoring is conducted once every fours years in order to ground truth a remote sensing model that uses annual satellite imagery to detect any significant growth or die-off across the mangrove communities at the Montebellos.

New interpretive and management signage has been installed in Claret Bay, Brandy Bay and in Willy Nilly Lagoon, with more on the way towards the end of the year that will showcase the animal translocation work across the islands. Marine parks staff have also been kept busy with whale disentanglement training and exercising the department's oiled wildlife response plans in Exmouth during a national oil spill exercise coordinated by the Australian Marine Oil Spill Centre, the oil and gas industry and AMSA. A big six months!

Humpback whales are on the move



More humpback whales will pass the Pilbara coast this year as larger numbers swim past our doorstep on their annual migration between the Antarctic and waters off the Kimberley coast. Many mothers will rest with their calves in Bunsen Channel in the Montebello Islands before continuing south.

It is important that all skippers understand how to safely operate their vessels around whales. Protection rules apply under the Wildlife Conservation (Close Season for Marine Mammals) Notice 1998 for whale watching and we ask that people adhere to these rules when on the water over the next few months. When within a distance of 300m from whales you are in the 'contact zone' and care must be taken not to disturb them. You should never approach whales within a distance of 100m or attempt to touch or swim with them. If a whale moves toward your vessel, either place your motor in neutral or move slowly away from the animal, at a speed of less than five knots. If you see a whale stranded on the beach or entangled at sea, please call the Karratha Parks and Wildlife 24hr number on 9182 2088.

Fisheries update—Filleting fish at sea

There has been some confusion regarding filleting fish at sea. Fish with and without size limits have slightly different rules when it comes to preparing to store them.

All fish with a minimum size limit, except for those species that also have a maximum size limit, can be carried at sea as fillets so long as the fillets are a **minimum of 30cm** long and **skin and scales are left on**. Fish without a size limit can be carried at sea provided the **skin is left on**.

In the case where you are preparing fish for lunch or dinner, the skin and/or scales must be left on the fillet until immediately before cooking.

Fisheries and marine officers have reported incidents where fish was stored with skin and scales removed. This makes it very difficult to identify the species of fish and is illegal. If you or your chef is found to have fillets without skin and/or scales, penalties may apply. Please ensure this message is passed on to anyone involved in preparing recreationally caught fish for consumption.

Photo— Department of Fisheries

Filleting fish with a maximum size

There has been apparent misunderstanding regarding the rules around filleting fish, particularly barramundi, at sea.

Before February 2013, only the Ord and Fitzroy River areas had a maximum size limit for barramundi and they were listed as "special risk finfish".

In February 2013 the regulations changed, extending the "special risk finfish" status and applying the maximum size limit to barramundi in all State waters. The changes also made it illegal for fishers to land or carry barramundi in a form other than whole across the State. Practically, this meant that you could no longer provide the barramundi catch-and-cook experience that your guests expect. We discovered this was not the intent of the legislation, so the regulation has since been amended.

You and your guests can now eat barramundi aboard your vessel if the fish is left whole until immediately before it is cooked for dinner. You may wish to keep the barramundi frame on board until the fish has been eaten.

This legislation and amendment applies to all finfish species with a maximum size limit, including estuary and Malabar cod.

FISHWATCH
REPORT
Illegal Fishing
Aquatic Pests
Aquatic Diseases
1800-815-507

Code of Conduct for recreational fishing in the Pilbara

The Pilbara region boasts an abundance of marine and estuarine species and some of the world's most unique coral reefs, seagrass meadows, mangrove forests and sponge gardens.

As a result, the region offers world-class boating, fishing, diving and snorkelling.

This Code of Conduct for Recreational Fishing in the Pilbara (the Code) has been developed to help sustain our precious fish resources and minimise the human footprint on this special place.

By following the Code you will not only help to protect the environment, but also enhance your fishing experiences.

The Code focuses on fishing best practice and fishing responsibly. It's both a philosophy for fishing and a practical way of ensuring there will be fish for future generations to catch.

The Code has been developed by Recfishwest working closely with local recreational fishers, funded by a grant from Chevron Australia's Onslow Community Spirit Fund.

It is available at http://recfishwest.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Code-of-Conduct-for-recreational-fishing-in-the-Pilbara.pdf

Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Fisheries**

The mangroves of the Montebellos

Six species of mangroves are found in the reserves, with the Montebello Islands' mangrove communities considered globally unique as they occur in the lagoons of oceanic islands and represent a unique offshore community.

There six species of mangrove found in the reserves include the white mangrove (*Avicennia marina*), ribbed-fruit orange mangrove (*Bruguiera exaristata),* yellow-leaf spurred mangrove (*Ceriops tagal),* red mangrove (*Rhizophora stylosa)*, club mangrove (*Aegialitis annulata*) and river mangrove (*Aegiceras corniculatum*).

The largest mangrove community (approximately 15ha) is found in Stephenson Channel and up in Willy Nilly Lagoon on Hermite Island, where individual trees can reach 5m in height.

Mangroves support a range of animal species, many of which are restricted to that environment. Common species include mud crabs, peanut worms and gastropods. Some whelks and barnacles are also restricted to living on mangrove trees. Ospreys and white-bellied sea eagles roost in mangroves, while brahminy kites and a range of smaller birds nest in them. These communities also provide valuable nursery areas for juvenile fishes and crustaceans.

Due to their remote and largely inaccessible location, there are few pressures on mangrove communities in the reserves and, as a result, the mangrove communities are currently in a relatively undisturbed condition. The current pressure that impacts on mangrove communities in the Montebello Islands is that of physical disturbance to the mangroves by fishing for mud crabs in these habitats. The long-term indirect effects of this activity on mangrove ecology are unknown but direct impacts, such as trampling of aerial roots and damage to individual trees are apparent.

The majority of the Montebello mangroves are inside the Willy Nilly Sanctuary Zone and are therefore protected from fishing and mudcrabbing, however there are several other areas in the recreational and general use zones that are targeted by the mud crab enthusiast.

Please take care when enjoying the mangrove communities, tread lightly and leave no trace.

Rhizophora mangroves on Gardenia Island. Photo—Parks and Wildlife

Parks and Wildlife diver undertaking coral monitoring in the Montebellos. Photo—Parks and Wildlife

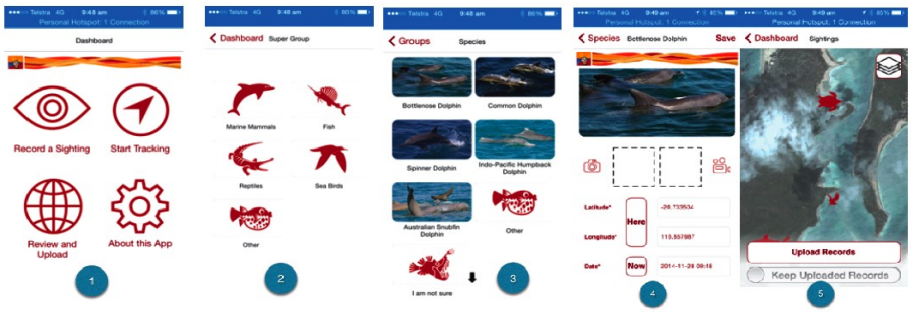
Corals under pressure

Parks and Wildlife marine staff recently spent 10 days at the Montebello Islands Marine Park undertaking routine coral and finfish community monitoring across nine fixed long-term monitoring sites. The team measured the overall condition of corals and finfish across the management zones (sanctuary, recreational and general use) to monitor trends over time, specifically looking at diversity of species, abundance and size of individuals, and recruits. The team was pleased to see that despite substantial coral mortality, due to warmer than normal summers in 2011, 2013 and 2014, there were signs of new coral recruits and healthy coral communities in some areas. However, the coral communities still have a long road ahead to full recovery and will rely on visitors being vigilant about where they anchor to prevent damage to coral.

The department continues to monitor the number and distribution of the crown of thorns starfish (COTs) after an outbreak was detected in 2014. The recent increase in COTS numbers in the Montebello and Barrow areas coincided with a decline in coral cover as a result of coral bleaching and subsequent mortality in 2013, caused by high ocean temperatures. On this recent survey, there was no indication that the number of COTS had increased on reefs where they were previously in high abundance. Encouragingly there also wasn't any obvious increase in the number of small COTS that would suggest increased abundances of adults in the near future. Nor was there any indication of increased occurrence of COTS on reefs where they were not previously detected. Based on this information it seems unlikely that COTS are spreading, although further surveys around Barrow Island and ongoing monitoring are required to confirm this. Parks and Wildlife undertakes coral and finfish surveys every two years and works in collaboration with various research institutes from across Australia including CSIRO, the University of Western Australia, Murdoch University, James Cook University and many more in order to answer some of the ecological questions about this unique biodiversity hotspot and to ultimately guide how we manage the ecosystem into the future.

Coastal Walkabout app—citizen science

Coastal Walkabout is an open access, dynamic, citizen science initiative which utilises smart phone technology and social media to connect with and motivate local communities to gather scientific observations within the coastal, estuarine and near-shore environments. It is a practical and user-friendly tool to document fauna sightings in the marine park and help to build a database of marine fauna that scientists and community members can access at anytime. You can export the file as an ArcGIS shape file or a Google Earth layer. School students can use it for projects, community environmental groups can use it for surveys, bird watchers can use it to document their sightings and ultimately we can use it to help manage the marine park. Download it and give it a go!



Signage gets a boost on the Montebello Islands

Parks and Wildlife has begun installing new signage across the Montebello Islands and giving old ones a much needed face-lift. An interpretive sign has been installed at the base of the trail that leads up to the historic military headquarters in Claret Bay that provides information on the nuclear testing that took place between 1952 and 1956.

The Willy Nilly Lagoon Sanctuary Zone sign has been repainted and a yellow bollard placed on the opposite side of the channel, clearly depicting the sanctuary zone boundary.

Parks and Wildlife plans to develop several more interpretive signs over the next six months providing information on the animal translocation and monitoring work that has taken place since 1998 on Hermite, Alpha, Trimouille and North West Islands. Visitors will be able to read about the mammals and birds that have been re-introduced including the spectacled hare wallaby, golden bandicoot, mala, Shark Bay mouse, boodie, spinifex bird and black and white fairy-wren and about their significance, their behaviours and adaptations to the environment.

Below left New signage installed in Claret Bay.
Centre Willy Nilly Sanctuary Zone sign.
Right Willy Nilly Sanctuary Zone
Photo—Parks and Wildlife

Visit us online parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au/park/Montebello-islands

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Department of Parks and Wildlife

Species ID Fact Sheet—Blackspot Tuskfish

Common name: Blackspot Tuskfish (also known as Bluebone or Tusky)

Scientific name: *Choerodon schoenleinii*

Size: Grows up to 80cm

Minimum legal size: 40cm

Bag Limit: 3

Distribution	Distributed throughout South East Asia, although mainly in the Western Pacific. Found throughout tropical Australia. In Western Australia from Ningaloo Reef to the Northern Territory border.
General description	Blackspot Tuskfish is a hard fighting and highly prized table fish. Popular with recreational fishers as they can be caught close to shore. They are built for rugged reefs and have a great ability to break fishing line in a couple of seconds, frequently before a fisher has time to put the brakes on. Blackspot Tuskfish are protogynous hermaphrodites, meaning that they begin life as females and change sex to males once they reach a particular size, or if the dominant male of an area disappears.
Identifying features	• Black spot is visible on the base of the middle dorsal fin • Body is dark green to blue • Horizontal blue lines are present on the tail fin
Habitat	Blackspot Tuskfish inhabit sand and weed areas near coral and rocky reefs in depths of up to 60m.
Colour	Colour is variable, however generally in adults, females are a green/yellow colour and males are green/blue. Juveniles have then same colouration and pattern as adults. A white blotch-like marking is found behind the namesake black spot on the upper rear section.
Diet	A large set of canine-like teeth are present when they're feeding on hard shelled food items, such as urchins or molluscs. It has been observed overturning rocks while searching for food.
Exploitation	Blackspot Tuskfish are not threatened in many areas of Australia due to the remoteness of coastline, where this species occurs. However, individual populations in some areas where there is heavy recreational fishing pressure may be under threat of localised depletions, e.g., Shark Bay, Dampier and Broome.

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