



MEDIA RELEASE

NT Researcher Studies Nesting Loggerhead Turtles

NT marine researcher, Dr Scott Whiting, recently returned from Mon Repos Conservation Park located 14 km east of Bundaberg in Queensland, which supports the largest loggerhead sea turtle nesting population on the east coast of Australia.

Dr Whiting from the newly established Marine Biodiversity Group within the Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts (NRETA), said the trip has enabled him to learn new turtle research techniques.

“The renowned Mon Repos research program was founded by Dr Colin Limpus and has been running for 40 years. Some turtles have breeding history of over 30 years in the area,” Mr Whiting said.

“New skills learnt at Mon Repos will help us to understand the biology of different turtle species in the NT.

“This knowledge is critical, as the NT supports six of the world’s seven species of marine turtle, with five species laying eggs on NT beaches.

Dr Whiting said during his seven days at Mon Repos he was trained in laparoscopy and ultrasound techniques which are used to assess the breeding condition and health of individual turtles.

“The percentage of new breeding female turtles to the nesting beach is one important factor that can be determined using these techniques,” Mr Whiting said.

“If there are no new breeding females then this indicates a major problem in the sustainability of the population.

Dr Whiting said major threats to turtles in the NT include discarded fishing nets that drown turtles at sea and feral animals such as pigs and dogs which dig up and eat their eggs.

“Many of the sea turtle populations and threats extend across the borders with Queensland and Western Australia, so a cooperative approach is needed for conservation,” Dr Whiting said.

“This trip was a great opportunity to enhance existing working relationships and set the foundations to establish cooperative research projects with other like-minded organisations such as the Queensland Environment Protection Agency (QEPA).

Dr Whiting said the Marine Biodiversity Group is working with the help of several Indigenous Sea Ranger Groups, in studying green, flatback, olive ridley and hawksbill turtles on their nesting beaches across the NT.

The impact of climate change on sea turtle nesting will also be a focus of future research.

“The sex of turtle hatchlings is determined by the temperature of the sand, warmer temperatures producing more females and cooler temperatures producing more males, global warming could produce an imbalance in sex ratio leading to low breeding rates.

“Severe increases in sand temperatures above lethal limits would mean that traditional nesting beaches become unproductive. Increases in sea levels also have the potential to destroy existing nesting beaches forcing turtles to find other nesting locations.

“A marine debris monitoring project, also being conducted by the Marine Biodiversity Group with the support of Indigenous communities, identifies and counts the number of discarded fishing nets on six NT beaches and records mortality of wildlife, such as turtles.

“Studies such as these identify causes of mortality and indicate ways in which management can help to conserve turtle populations in the NT.”

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Media Note – For more information contact Scott Whiting on 89209221. Photo available on request.

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