

Media Release:

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Identifying Marine Ecotourism Opportunities in Timor-Leste

The Department of Natural Resources, Environment and The Arts (NRETA) Marine Biodiversity Group are conducting regular aerial surveys of Timor-Leste's coastal waters in partnership with the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) to identify potential marine ecotourism opportunities in the region.

NRETA wildlife officer Ray Chatto and marine scientists Dr Scott Whiting and Dr Kiki Dethmers are undertaking monthly aerial surveys of large marine fauna in the coastal waters of Timor-Leste throughout 2008, with the third field trip taking place early last week.

"The aerial wildlife surveys are designed to look for the occurrence of whale sharks, large sharks, whales, dolphins, dugongs, crocodiles and turtles in the area," Mr Chatto said.

"Each field trip takes place over two days – the first day we conduct aerial surveys from a small fixed wing aircraft and the second day we undertake boat-based surveys to get a closer look."

AIMS scientist and Project Leader, Dr Mark Meekan said the project is primarily focussed on identifying sustainable, coastal and marine ecotourism opportunities for the developing country.

"Over the last 20 years ecotourism that enables people to interact with large marine fauna, from whale watching to snorkelling with large sharks, such as the giant whale sharks, has become increasingly popular, in fact, marine ecotourism has become one of the world's fastest growing marine industries," Dr Meekan said.

"Importantly, for developing countries, marine ecotourism provides significant flow-on effects to local communities and economies where few alternative sources of income exist.

"The really good news is that the ocean current systems that surround Timor-Leste are well known as a migration pathway for many species of large marine fauna.

"The monthly aerial surveys by NRETA, combined with satellite remote sensing data will help us determine where the marine fauna may occur on a regular basis, and whether development of a regional industry based on ecotourism is a possibility."

The project is being undertaken in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) in Timor-Leste and is one of six Government of Timor-Leste funded collaborative, coastal and marine projects being undertaken by Territory scientists to support sustainable regional economic development of coastal industries such as ecotourism, aquaculture and fisheries.

Mr Chatto said the research, planning and training projects are also focussed on building Timor-Leste's capacity in coastal and marine science and management,

"One of the outcomes of this particular project is training Timorese staff from MAFF to undertake aerial wildlife surveys in the region," Mr Chatto said.

“East Timor’s Government recognises the value of its natural resources and biodiversity and have sought the Northern Territory’s assistance to ensure that these natural marine resources maintain their value and are used in a sustainable way.”

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Media Note – for more information contact Ray Chatto on 8920 9260 or Mark Meekan on 8920 9240

Images –

1. Embarking on the aerial survey

2. Aerial image Timor-Leste

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