

Media Release:

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Genetics Confirm Australian Snubfin Found off NT and WA Coast

After more than 12 months of genetic research a Northern Territory Government scientist has revealed for the first time that the Australian snubfin dolphin is present in both Northern Territory and Western Australian waters.

Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport (NRETAS) Scientist Carol Palmer said the research, which involved collecting dolphin skin samples for genetic analysis, followed earlier research in 2005.

"In 2005 it was found that the Irrawaddy dolphin was actually a new Australian species of dolphin, the Australian snubfin, but there were no confirmed samples from the Northern Territory or Western Australia," Ms Palmer said.

"So as part of the Northern Territory Coastal Dolphin Research Project we focussed on collecting skin samples from the Australian snubfin species found in Territory and Western Australia waters to confirm their presence.

"Collecting the skin samples for the genetic testing has been extremely challenging as you need to get pretty close to the dolphins, the only time they let you do that is when they are socialising or playing but that behaviour doesn't happen all that often so every skin sample obtained was hard won.

"We analysed skin samples we managed to obtain from dolphins located in Port Essington, Northern Territory and with the assistance of a sister project, The Kimberley Inshore Dolphin Project managed by Deb Thiele we obtained samples from dolphins in Broome, Western Australia.

"After comparing and analysing samples from Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia we have confirmed that the Australian snubfin occurs in both Northern Territory and Western Australian waters and this adds valuable information to the research findings from 2005."

The Coastal Dolphin Research project began in Darwin Harbour and Garig Gunak Barlu National Park in March 2008, following a study undertaken in the Alligator River at Kakadu National Park, and is the first research project to undertake extensive research on coastal dolphins in Territory waters.

"The overall research project has studied three species of coastal dolphins; the newly described Australian snubfin, the Indo-Pacific humpback and the Indo-Pacific bottlenose that are found in the Northern Territory, with genetic study focussed on Australian snubfin and the Indo-Pacific humpback," Ms Palmer said.

"In addition to the genetics, we have been collecting a range of ecological information on these really fascinating animals.

"Coastal and river dolphins are among the worlds most threatened mammals so to clarify the genetics in Australia for this coastal dolphin is a very important first step in developing appropriate management guidelines for Northern Territory waters."

The research project is a joint partnership between the Northern Territory Government, Charles Darwin University, WWF-Australia, ING Direct, Australian Wildlife Conservancy and the Kimberley Inshore Dolphin Project. For more information on the project go to www.nt.gov.au/marine

Ends

Media Note – for more information contact Carol Palmer on 0400 707 273

Images - 1. The Australian Snubfin (image courtesy of Marguerite Tarzia) 2. Indo-Pacific humpback with calf (image courtesy Carol Palmer)

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