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TI Protects Nature and Tradition

Conservation in the Torres Strait has taken on a whole new meaning for students at the biggest high school in the region. Naturalist Steve Wilson reports on how they are tagging an investment in the future ...

A far sighted program designed to provide senior students with a new perspective into a vital Torres Strait resource — turtles — has been evolving at Thursday Island SHS over the past four years.

Turtle conservation is close to the heart of many Queenslanders judging by the huge number of visitors to the Mon Repos rookery near Bundaberg.

In Torres Strait, it hinges on the simple, significant fact that turtles are an important component of people's diets. If this old tradition is to continue, today's harvest must be sustainable.

Mindful that an important resource is declining, the school is encouraging its students to assist in ongoing research into turtle migration, lifespan and population size. Through the efforts of science co-ordinator Ross Grimly, a group of students visit local quays each year to count tracks and help tag nesting female turtles.

'Programs like this are where the future of turtle conservation lies — the participation of the indigenous communities and the amalgamation of the education system with scientific marine research,' said turtle expert Matt Forrest.

Tagging had previously taken place off Crab Island — a significant rookery for flatback turtles — near the western tip of Cape York Peninsula, but the large number of crocodiles in the area prompted a switch to Johnson Islet, a sliver of sand to the east of Cape York.

Teachers, Julie Dutoit, who already boasted turtle tagging experience, and Marcus Tanner led a 17-strong group of students and Mr Forrest to the Islet late last year to complete the first assessment there in five years. Tracks of 11 hawksbill turtles, a flatback turtle, and evidence of deep body pits dug by nesting green turtles were discovered in the five minutes it took to stroll around Johnson Islet.

Students were divided into two shifts to monitor the island through the night. Quietly walking its perimeter every 20 minutes in the dark, their ears strained to hear the telltale shuffling of a great reptile heaving its bulk ashore. Unfortunately, the night was silent.

By day, nearby islands including Mt Adolphus were checked, where Mr Forrest dug deep into a nest to find 23 live baby hawksbills and released them into the sea after discovering signs a lizard had dug into the nest.

A second night's vigil on Johnson Islet was rewarded with a nesting hawksbill. It now bears two stainless steel numbered tags on its flippers, having been measured and damage to a rear flipper noted.

The school's program has afforded students like Kepu Bon an opportunity to now look at turtles from a different angle. 'I wanted to see the tagging — to feel and touch a turtle and see the eggs. usually we only see them from a dinghy. This has been different from just cutting up a turtle and eating it,' Kepu said.

That tagged turtle is swimming out there somewhere. Hawksbills are rarely eaten in Torres Strait, but they face heavy predation overseas for the overlapping plates of tortoise-shell which are used for jewellery. There is a chance someone else will catch this one sometime, providing information on movements and growth rate. Even if we never know, it has already made an important contribution by playing a hands-on part in the adults of tomorrow gaining a vital insight into the conservation of their own marine resources.

Thursday Island SHS is to be congratulated for encouraging this interaction. □

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