

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL PARKS, CONSERVATION RESERVES AND MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

Is the traditional use of marine turtles in Australian marine protected areas including the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and Torres Strait sustainable?

Preamble

Internationally Australia and in particular Queensland, appears to have gained an international reputation of having a well managed marine turtle conservation program in place. This is true to a certain extent, with the large offshore areas falling within the Great Barrier Reef and State Marine Parks.

However there continues to be declining nesting populations and major, ongoing threats, to both nesting and foraging turtle populations. North Queensland is very privileged to have two of the world's largest nesting aggregations of green and flatback turtles on Raine and Crab Islands respectively and probably the largest nesting cohort for hawksbills in the western Pacific on Milman Island.

Significant threats

Recently Australian sea turtle biologist Dr Colin Limpus identified a major threat to the green turtle nesting cohort which uses Raine Island in the Far Northern Section of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. It appears that turtles nesting on Raine Island (where up to 14 000 green turtles have been recorded nesting at one time on this 2km diameter cay - the most significant nesting site with this northern nesting population) may have been doing so in vain for some years.

Guano mining on the island in the 1800's and early 1900's appears to have damaged the island in such way that sand has been "leaking" from the island and has reached a stage where for some years now eggs laid on the beaches have been subject to inundation. As a result, what was thought to have been a relatively robust breeding population may in fact have seen a significant portion of its recruitment fail over the last decade or so. Dr Limpus has indicated that we may see this population crash within the coming decade.

Additionally, several other factors appear to be contributing to the decline of turtle populations in northern Australian waters including; bycatch in inshore gill net fisheries, predation of eggs and hatchlings by feral pigs, entanglement and ingestion of marine pollution, loss or degradation of foraging and nesting habitat and an increased incident of boat strike. However, probably the most significant rectifiable threat to marine turtle populations is over-harvesting of adult females and eggs.

Unsustainable traditional hunting

While we support sustainable traditional hunting for sea turtles in principle, it appears that an increasing take of turtles, particularly adult female turtles by indigenous people in north Queensland Marine Protected Areas (MPA) is going to rub up against sustainability.

The hard facts of this issue are that:

- In Northern Australia the harvest of sea turtles and their eggs is ongoing and significant;
- The breakdown of some traditional checks and balances has meant some take is not sanctioned by elders within a community;
- The use of power boats allows access over far greater distances and the capture of turtles is easier.

Threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas

The survival of green turtles in northern Australian MPAs and through the federally managed Torres Strait Protected Zone is anything but assured and it is becoming increasingly clear that the 'traditional harvest' of these animals is a very significant component of this.

While both State and Commonwealth government agencies have deployed some resources in the attempt to manage the traditional take of turtles (and dugong) it is obvious that a far greater effort is needed to address this issue.

At present the Australian Commonwealth government is developing a **Draft Recovery Plan for Marine Turtles in Australia**

<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/recovery/marine-turtles/index.html>

This plan continues to downplay the issue of indigenous harvest of turtles in Australia and appears to put relatively minor issues (in Australia at least) such as traffic on beaches ahead of it. The draft plan also states that '...The cost of this plan should be covered under the core business expenditure of the affected organisations...'

The likelihood of the plan succeeding in its core objective of '*...maintain(ing) and enhance(ing) existing levels of protection for marine turtles to enable population growth so that these species may be removed from the threatened species list under the EPBC Act..*' is zero under such funding arrangements.

Are governments providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements?

Far greater resources are needed to tackle the issue of determining and controlling the sustainable take of sea turtles and their eggs. This must be done by working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities, and the reality is that a sustainable harvest increasingly appears to be a zero level of take.

It is not an easy issue to deal with but to ignore it along with other pressing problems such as the failure of the Raine Island nesting population (and overseas harvest of the part of this population that migrates across international boundaries) means that what is still recognised as some of the great sea turtle populations left in the world could be gone in the next few generations.

Recent actions by Greenpeace Australia to impede “traditional hunting by Japanese whaling ships in the Southern Ocean highlights the question of what is the “culturally appropriate” use of resources: what is traditional and what is not, what is sustainable and what is not? Australia's Commonwealth Environment Minister and Prime Minister have also taken a stand against the Japanese harvest of whales.

So while the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment takes a stand on the issue of the harvest of whales by Japanese research vessels, is he also prepared to take a stand against culturally inappropriate and probably over harvesting of other endangered species?

We believe that marine turtles, that are listed as Vulnerable and or Endangered species under federal conservation legislation, living within Australian Marine Protected Areas, that are being exposed to threats that should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Neil Mattocks

Ian Bell

We would like to make it very clear the above comments are our personal opinions and in no way reflect those of any organisation to which we belong or are employed by.