



EXPEDITION DIARY

Western Australia 2011

By Paul o'Dowd

29 October

G'day to the team and to anyone else out there following the progress of Biosphere Expeditions Flat-back turtle conservation project in Western Australia.

Welcome to the first diary entry for this expedition. I am your expedition leader, Paul o'Dowd, and I'm eagerly looking forward to meeting you in person and getting stuck into the project. Currently I'm home in Port Douglas just packing and sorting things out for the expedition. I'll be in Perth on the 3rd November and Broom a day or so later, seeing to preparations with Erin and Matthias.

I can be contacted for emergencies, (such as being unable to meet the team on schedule at our designated assembly point in Broome) on (07) 40983646 most evenings until this Wednesday, or 0414743264 from Wednesday on, but please make it, we really need you.

I will send out a few more of these short diary entries and keep you all posted with the progress of the preparation phase.

All the best,

Paul o'Dowd.

4 October

Everyone has arrived in Broome and we've put a video diary entry on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsg1cvq-gTE>.

Please excuse the poor sound quality. We're looking forward to seeing group 1 on Monday at 08.00 at the Mercure.

7 October

Group 1 has arrived safe and sound at Eco Beach and are on their first patrols as I write this. There's also a video explaining how these patrols work at www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGxYXcQRb3Y and on www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1. Beautiful location, beautiful weather, good company. Roll on turtles - we hope!

9 November

We're well into the swing of things with the turtles. The Jack's Creek overnight patrol has had most of the encounters with the Resort end quieter so far. There's a video of us working a turtle (from last year) at www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSM53SKy1aw and a walk around our Eco Beach base (from yesterday) at www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1.

11 November

It's night four of the West Australian flatback turtle expedition and we have had turtles on each night of our project so far. Tonight the tide demands that one team heads out on their survey at midnight which means a three a.m. return to base. I got the short straw, but after wrangling my first turtle last night, the crazy hour of our patrol pales into insignificance compared to the magnificent ancient creatures that we'll be working with through the night.

12 November

The Kimberly storm season is famous for it's spectacular thunder storms and on the horizon as I type is a stunning example of a towering tropical storm. I guess what I'm saying is I'm glad I brought my rain jacket and for those about to join the expedition for slot two, make sure you pack yours! Don't worry, the heat up here is intense...and in tents...so the rain will be a blessing when it finally does break.

The team are now a crack turtle patrolling machine. Datta the turtle magnet's spell was broken last night when no team came back with a direct sighting but we did have some tracks to process in the morning. Debs will be staying with us through slot 2 so her experience will be much appreciated as we head into the second week.

For those in slot two, please find attached, a day to day schedule which details out general operations and some options for the time we spend not on patrol.

Erin and I are looking forward to meeting you all.

17 November

We are three nights into slot 2 and last night was a busy one for two of our patrols. The first patrol had a big girl crawling up the beach within the first half hour and it took the best part of two hours to get through the egg laying and subsequent processing. Then, only meters up the dark beach we came upon two fresh sets of tracks which had been laid while we were busy. Once we had measured and recorded those tracks we headed back to base but just as we were reaching the end of the patrol we almost fell over another turtle in the final stages of digging her pit. For the second time in a night, Margaret, Imtraut, Tony and I were treated to the sight of the dexterous and delicate excavation of the nest chamber followed by the deposition of over 50 big eggs. The patrol leader, Tony, has a unique and effective way of "whispering" the turtle as we fussed around with our measurements. The compliance of a turtle on it's way back to the sea cannot be guaranteed though, and we all came away from the interaction with lots of sand in our faces but that couldn't hide our big satisfied grins.

20 November

Last night we adopted a very different strategy to turtle hunting. Instead of three independent patrols acting alone in the night, we have sent out teams which interact repeatedly along a shorter section of the beach. Last nights effort yielded no sightings at all but the morning survey revealed a lot of activity in tracks in the sand apparently withing a short while of our packing it in for the night. Tonight was a different story. Our teams have only just started filtering in from the beach after a huge night measuring and tagging and being pushed backwards through the sand by the little bulldozers known as Flatback turtles. This is the last night of the WA expedition. Both teams excelled in their duties and have been described by the turtle scientists as a "well oiled machine". Nice one everyone.

21 November

The Biosphere Expeditions Flatback Turtle project in Western Australia has wound up for this year today. We processed 16 individual turtles, some of which returned to their nesting beach twice in the course of the two weeks of our patrols. Some had been tagged but those who weren't tagged are now. The data we gathered will go into the efforts to understand the least studied sea turtle on Earth and the only sea turtle endemic to Australia. The work we helped with is the first such effort to be attempted in this part of the country and a radical and sensitive approach to turtle science. Thanks to the teams from slot 1 and 2. Your work was more important than you may realize. From Erin and myself, it was a pleasure working with you and we enjoyed the hours in darkness patrolling the beach and the lazy days at Eco Beach between surveys. A special thanks to Debs who spent the whole two weeks with us. Please stay in touch one and all.