



Onlookers watch as a team of scientists and Biosphere Expeditions volunteers fit Lucy with a tracking device.

eco beach

SAVING THE FLATBACK TURTLE

text: tamara caddy
images: tamara caddy

Tamara Caddy goes to Eco Beach, just south of Western Australia's Broome to be a part of Biosphere Expeditions' flatback turtle nesting monitoring project.

GLOVES PLEASE! SCALPEL please. Can someone please pass me a tag?" It was only moments before, as we were watching the sun go down over the unbroken stretch of beach, that the radio call came in: a turtle had been spotted at dusk, outside of patrol hours and the normal laying times. We quickly pile into the truck and bounce along the beach, hoping not to miss her.

Her scars are recorded, barnacles removed. She is tagged (blood is drawn) and a DNA sample is taken while she tries to make her way back to the sea. Four people then gently pick her up and place her onto a plastic tub; even though her eyes are covered to calm her she still tries to 'paddle' away. A harness and satellite tracker are swiftly attached to her. On this flatback turtle nesting project only a couple of turtles will be fitted with tracking devices, which have a hefty A\$7,000 price tag. Tonight's turtle, now named Lucy, was fitted with the Platform Transmitter Terminal tracking device,

which will periodically transmit her location and thus deliver vital information on her path to foraging and mating grounds for the next 9 to 12 months until the battery dies or the harness corrodes – whichever comes first. Flatback turtles have an air of mystery and grace – in fact, they are so mysterious that they are internationally classified as 'data deficient', as there's not enough known about them to determine how many of them there are, whether they are endangered and, if so, how critically. Most probably they are, given that all of the other six marine turtles are endangered. Crucially, flatback turtles only nest in the waters of northern Australia. The mission of collecting more data has brought us, a Biosphere Expeditions crew and a team of scientists, to Eco Beach, approximately 130 kilometres south of Broome, Western Australia. Wildlife research and conservation organisation Biosphere Expeditions has gathered us (paying volunteers) to assist experienced

scientists to gather data. The information collected will form reports which may influence laws and projects in the region, including the current Western Australian law that prohibits the relocation of any eggs (for safer hatching). We are holiday-makers-cum-conservationists, armed with clipboards, head torches, measuring tapes, GPS devices and tagging equipment. We're a motley bunch – Singaporean finance high-flyers, a US marine, holidaying retirees and a nomadic school teacher. The previous group included grey nomads, adventurous Europeans and glamour girls with a penchant for high heels and long lunches. We let Lucy waddle back to the water and I wish her a safe journey, silently saying, "Good luck, lady. Good luck." She'll need it. She'll battle against the odds to dodge natural predators and will need some luck not to get caught in almost invisible 'ghost' fishing nets or mistake discarded plastic bags and longline fishing bait

as food. To her, plastic looks dangerously like jellyfish and if she eats it she'll end up starving to death as it expands in her stomach. I find it sad, wistful and beautiful to see her, exhausted and powered only by instinct, hauling herself down the beach after laying and burying her eggs. With skin that is soft and wrinkly, she's like a widowed, gummy nanna waddling down to the local shops, slowly but steadily going about her business. She'll swim to foraging grounds several thousands of kilometres away, alone and in the water for most of her lifetime, apart from brief mating encounters. Of the eggs she lays only one in 10 hatchlings will make it to water and only one in 1,000 laid will live long enough to return to this same beach in 30-odd years time to lay her own eggs – if that beach is still there and not colonised with houses, hotels and disorientating lights. Immediately upon starting the expedition and meeting the scientists and expedition leader, their passion hits you head-on. The first of three so-called turtle talks barrage us with information and terminology relating to 'false crawls', 'carapaces' and



Lucy goes back into the ocean with the fitted tracking device.

'body pitting'. We are briefed on the datasheet, and what and where to measure and record. So as not to disturb the nesting flatbacks, we must march up the dark beach in silence, wearing black clothing and working in darkness, except when red lights are used to record the data. Flash

tides. We hope to catch a turtle in the act of nesting (or find its tracks) so that we can count, measure, mark and GPS track it. If the turtles we come across haven't been recorded before they'll also be tagged and a DNA sample taken. Many of the girls false crawl. That is, they go to the effort

“Holding onto her carapace (shell), covering her eyes and digging your knees into the sand to stop the 100-plus kilogram huffing and puffing lady as she tries to make a beeline for the water is no easy feat. She'll be still, rally her strength and then once again heave against you.”

photography is forbidden and gloves must be worn when handling the turtles. The setting at Eco Beach where we work is a 10 kilometre uninterrupted stretch of white sand, flanked by dunes and unpopulated by people, especially at this time of the year. By night we march up the beach for up to 10 kilometres in three-hour shifts, the times determined by the

of coming to shore and then don't complete the lay either because the spot they have chosen isn't suitable or because something spooks them. Last monitoring season the team found approximately 2.5 false crawls for every successful nest. Not all the groups are lucky enough to spot turtles every night so in the morning we eagerly swap tales.



Tyler, a volunteer, measures the flatback turtle while the expedition leader, Wren, records data and Kurt restrains the turtle.



Lucy gets measured by Tony, a field worker, and Vanessa, a volunteer.

On patrol the air changes from a leisurely march along the deserted, moonlit beach to intense in a moment. We have spotted one. We must be quiet and still as we stake her out, ready to pounce as soon as she's done and heading home to the water. It's no easy feat holding onto her carapace (shell), covering her eyes and digging your knees into the sand to stop the 100-plus kilogram huffing and puffing lady as she tries to make a beeline for the water. She'll be still, rally her strength and then once again heave against you. The towels put on her eyes quickly stink of a distinctly fishy and salty stench. Later, around camp, the debate between 'turtle wrangling' versus 'turtle whispering' – that is the difference between using brute force or caresses and cooing to restrain the turtle – is discussed. It's a scurry to get all the measurements down correctly. You can only respect the instinctive drive of such a creature that has probably been around longer than I have. For me, each time one disappears off into the waves it's a pensive and serene moment to marvel at the ancient instinctual programming that sends them on such a determined mission.

By day we enjoy the resort and its surrounds by kayaking, bushwalking, fishing, whizzing around in a boat to (Kimberley-style) red rock caves or lazing by the pool. November, when the flatbacks nest, is so hot you'll be constantly coated with a layer of sweat. During our eight-day stay each group camps for a few nights at Jack's Creek, 10 kilometres down the beach. I'm lulled into a comfortable routine, which is a balance between being productive and challenged while sneaking in some relaxation. After a week of 'turtle hunting' I've realised that, like most of nature, the more you find out about these creatures the more that there is to know. As the adage goes, 'knowledge is power'; the more data that can be collected the more it can protect the nesting turtles, and subsequently the surrounding fauna and flora. This Biosphere Expedition isn't just holiday-makers frolicking with turtles – it is hoped that the data collected will help these amazing creatures to survive. When the holiday is over and I'm back at my desk in the city, I can't help but wonder where Lucy is and say to myself again, "Good luck, lady. Good luck."

GET PLANNING

Get There

Qantas fly direct from Brisbane to Broome as of April. Fly to Perth from Melbourne and Sydney, then to Broome. www.qantas.com.au

Stay There

Eco Beach Resort operates from March to January with various accommodation options available including: eco villas, eco tents and a beach house. www.ecobeach.com.au

Tour There

Biosphere Expeditions operate the flatback turtle nesting monitoring project from Eco Beach during November. A seven-night turtle monitoring expedition at Eco Beach costs around A\$2,190. In 2011 expedition dates are 7–14 November and 14–21 November. www.biosphere-expeditions.org

Get Informed

To track Lucy, for more information on sea turtles or to adopt a sea turtle go to www.seaturtle.org For more information about what to do in Broome and the region visit www.australiasnorthwest.com