QUEENSLAND Marine Turtle NETWORK FORUM

EVENT WRAP-UP

Australian Government

REEF TRUST

Great Barrier Reef Foundation

Turtle Care

BCCA

Nest to Ocean Turtle Protection Program

STA sea turtle alliance inc.

Sunshine Coast COUNCIL

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Foreword

During the development of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation's (GBRF) Burnett Mary Community Action Plan (CAP), marine turtle groups identified the significant value of forming a Queensland Marine Turtle Network (QMTN) to address key barriers to knowledge exchange, support understanding around priorities and gaps, and address disjointed and disparate initiatives that result in duplicated effort or limit collaboration across and between Reef regions. Turtle Care Volunteers Queensland (TCVQ) took the lead with a project to identify further support for the proposed network, form a Steering Committee and host an inaugural QMTN Forum.

It is with great pleasure, that the QMTN presents here the summary of that Forum, and an action plan for the QMTN's next steps.

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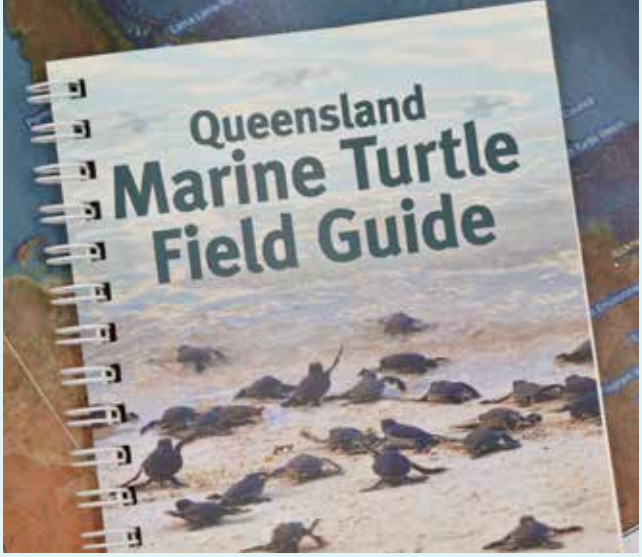
ESTABLISHING THE NETWORK

In 2021, Nev and Bev McLachlan from Turtle Care Volunteers Queensland and Wreck Rock Turtle Monitoring expressed the need to bring marine turtle monitoring groups and volunteers together to meet, share their notes and experiences, concerns, and ideas on how to better conserve marine turtles in Queensland.

The idea gained some momentum through a pilot group survey resulting in a grant to support the formation of a network and hosting a Forum. A steering committee was formed in late 2022 to develop the objectives of the Network and organise its first Forum.

The Queensland Marine Turtle Network (QMTN) aims to support community groups, researchers, and organisations undertaking Queensland turtle monitoring and research projects to:

- Share knowledge, experience, and learnings – to enhance delivery on the ground.
- Provide linkages/connections to the research community and be a conduit for knowledge.
- Provide expertise and advice for groups and volunteers (in addition to the information currently provided by the Department of Environment and Science and Local Government).
- Provide opportunities for partnership and collaboration, with the ability to deliver more comprehensive activities.
- Build social capital to enable turtle groups to support each other and build resilience.
- Advocate actions to improve outcomes for marine turtles and support member organisations by providing collective advice.
- Work collaboratively with similar networks in the Northern Territory and Western Australia.



QMTN FORUM 2023

The inaugural QMTN Forum was held on 27 May 2023 in Bundaberg (Taribelang Bunda Country). Forty-six participants (including eleven online) attended the event from around Queensland from the Cape (Lama Lama Country) to the Gold Coast.

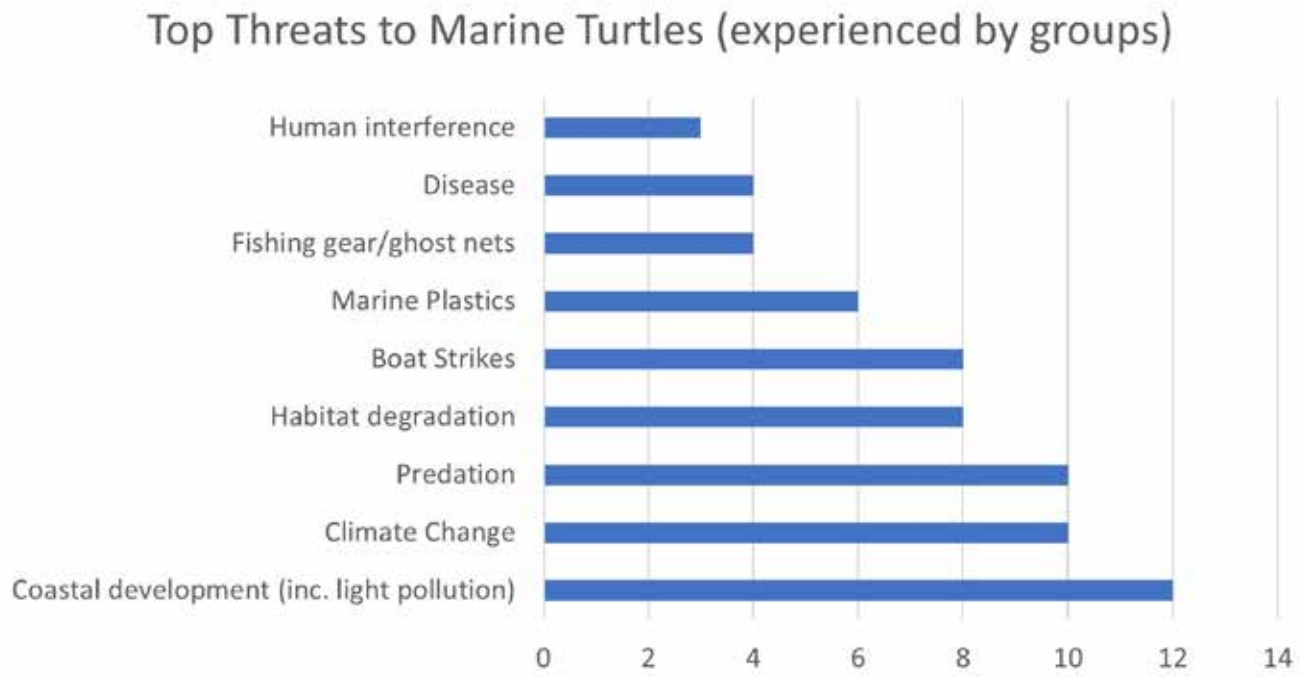
The Forum aimed to increase collaboration, cohesion, and resilience amongst network members to increase knowledge sharing and reduce duplicated effort between marine turtle groups.

In the lead up to the Forum, groups participated in an online survey that allowed them to establish their own agenda for the Forum. Throughout the one-day event, both in-person and online attendees participated in a series of breakout sessions discussing threats to marine turtles, challenges for groups and suggestions on how to improve outcomes for marine turtle conservation. Forum participants also discussed options for the Network moving forward.

Facilitated by Sue Sargent, the Forum was funded by the partnership between the Australian Government's Reef Trust and the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, with support from a steering committee with representatives from Turtle Care Volunteers Queensland Inc., Burnett Catchment Care Association, James Cook University, Nest to Ocean Turtle Protection Program, Sea Turtle Alliance Inc. and Sunshine Coast Council.

SURVEY RESULTS – THREATS TO MARINE TURTLES

In the pre-Forum survey, groups were asked to identify the top three threats to marine turtles in their local area. There was a good spread of responses with coastal development (including light pollution), climate change and predation by native animals (goannas and iguanas), feral pests (foxes and pigs) and domestic pets (cats and dogs) the top three responses.



SURVEY RESPONDENTS ALSO IDENTIFIED SEVERAL OTHER THREATS INCLUDING:

- Loss of natural diet i.e., seagrass.
- Tourism and vehicles - 4WDs, jet skis and boats e.g., 24/7 access to Bribie Island Ocean Beach National Park with hooning behaviour.
- 4WD vehicles - lights disorientating nesting turtles, ruts obstructing safe passage to the ocean for hatchlings and driving on dunes.
- Pedestrian traffic (people) accessing dunes (nesting habitat areas), walking along nesting beaches at night using flashlights and unlawful overnight campers in the dunes with pup tents and campfires.
- Recreational fishing at night – using bright lights to attract fish inshore disturbing nesting turtles.
- Off-leash dogs
- Microplastics in hatchlings.

SURVEY RESULTS - CHALLENGES FOR GROUPS

Groups were next asked to identify the most significant challenges for their organisations in delivering marine turtle work. Responses fell into seven main categories:

- **Funding and support** – finding the resources for volunteer coordination and vital equipment including vehicles (such as a 4WD, ATV or boat).
- **Site accessibility** – the logistics of getting to remote or difficult-to-access locations including mud, mangroves, creeks, offshore areas, and tidal work.
- **Volunteers** - recruiting, training, and retaining program participants.
- **Administration overload** – volunteers (and staff) want to participate in the hands-on activities such as monitoring or strandings, but rarely want to get involved in complex paperwork and data recording that needs to be completed.
- **Training** – inequitable accessibility to quality training and qualifications for volunteers. Gaps in training programs, e.g., new methods and how to manage the public on a turtle nesting beach.
- **Public education and awareness** – making the community more aware of threats to marine turtles such as coastal development, lighting, and climate change. Increases in turtle tourism and informal human interaction – people trying to interfere with turtles or nests and predation by domestic pets.
- **Veterinary support** – limited access to veterinary or rehabilitation care for injured turtles, which may also result in lengthy and costly transport times for turtles and volunteers.

SURVEY RESULTS – GROUP ACHIEVEMENTS

Through the survey, groups were asked to share their biggest achievement or innovation over the last 12 months that supported turtle monitoring and conservation in their local area.

Groups reported back how they had enhanced their programs.

- satellite tagging
- facial profiling to monitor changes to individual turtles in short timeframes
- sand temperature and nest predation monitoring
- researched soft shell disease through rehabilitation and necropsy work
- changed the ways that data was recorded using iPads - improving data quality and introducing a publicly available dashboard for communicating results
- reduced threats by updating lighting and increasing nest protection
- provided better coordination and beach coverage by volunteers
- started a youth-led turtle initiative
- collaborated with the local surf club to turn off their spotlight during the turtle nest run
- increased the number of trained volunteers
- delivered education and awareness talks in the local community
- successfully applied for funding for vital equipment including new tanks, filtration equipment and a mobile clinic.

SURVEY RESULTS - BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

Groups were asked to rate how much they collaborated with other groups and organisations to support their marine turtle work.

Five organisations reported that they were already collaborating a lot to a great deal to support their turtle work. The majority (thirteen groups) felt like they were collaborating a little to a moderate amount with only two groups suggesting that they were not collaborating with other groups at all.

Groups could see the benefits of collaboration including opportunities to share knowledge between turtle organisations, providing solutions and opportunities such as funding, research, data collection and expanding field sites for projects.

However, groups also identified that more support was needed to improve or enhance their collaboration.

BUILDING COLLABORATION

Collaboration was also workshopped at the Forum, with groups learning from each other who they were collaborating with, what makes good collaboration, and what you can offer partners.

While it was clear that some organisations were collaborating very well, the opportunities for collaboration largely depended on location. Opportunities for greater collaboration/support from a Network could reduce some of the barriers caused by distance, improve consistency and facilitate knowledge-sharing (e.g., soft shell syndrome) across the Network.

Workshop participants highlighted that knowledge needs to be shared. Groups want to see more communication back from the Department of Environment and Science on the data they are collecting, and outcomes from that data such as a greater response to predation or other local issues. Good collaboration is a two-way transfer of knowledge.

FROM THE QMTN FORUM WORKSHOPS

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING STAFF/VOLUNTEERS

Attracting and retaining staff and volunteers was a common and ongoing issue for most of the organisations. The top suggestions provided by Forum participants were to:

- Set clear expectations from the outset – establish a fixed term for volunteers to reduce burn out and enable new recruits to come through.
- Keep the communication lines open. Ensure that your volunteers participate in the conversation loop and provide feedback.
- Acknowledge your volunteers, make sure they feel noticed and valued.
- Find fun ways to keep your volunteers involved and engaged (not just through their volunteering).
- Try new ways to attract volunteers – like social media or a pub talk.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS - GETTING THE MESSAGES OUT

Groups discussed the problems of getting their messages out to their community. Key learnings were:

- Signage is not enough, but where it is used, messaging needs to be tailored to the location and user-group.
- Groups should explore different options to increase public education e.g., local radio stations, talks and workshops e.g., Scouts, Rotary, Lions Clubs, Country Women's Association, Men's Shed or Older Men Unlimited to share your messages.
- Ask your community to help, get them involved in on-ground activities (and thank them for their support, celebrate and share community achievement).
- People are never too young to get involved – engage youth through Junior Ranger activities e.g., Turtle Track counts before school.
- When more compliance (enforcement) activities are needed, explore options through your local Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger groups or Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) officers.

Forum participants called for a statewide coordinated campaign encouraging the public to get on board with messages like 'Enjoy the beach during the day, leave it alone at night' and encouraging 'small changes in your everyday routine for a positive outcome' e.g., the collective benefits of reducing the use of single-use plastics, to support turtle conservation.

STREAMLINING AND STRENGTHENING TRAINING

Training was a key discussion point at the Forum with participants asking for options to streamline training and provide more equitable access through decentralisation of training to areas outside of Mon Repos. Options for accredited training (including youth initiatives to build a future generation of turtle conservationists 'Team Turtle') were also discussed, as these would maintain the high level of data quality required to support policy work undertaken by the Queensland Government. Another suggestion was to provide online refresher courses or group exchange opportunities to overcome the challenges of working in isolation.

NEST PROTECTION AND PREDATION

Predation is a highly emotive issue, and the loss of any threatened species nest is heartbreaking (especially for volunteers). The problem is wide-spread, location based and needs an integrated pest management approach as predators are good learners.

Predation isn't limited to introduced species such as people, pigs, foxes, and off-leash domestic dogs. Native species predation on native threatened species is problematic at several locations including wongari (dingo) on K'gari, goannas at Wreck Rock and Bribie Island, and even ghost crabs in West Australia. These are more complicated and problematic from a management/control perspective. Groups were keen to share ideas and investigate new options (research and innovation) to reduce turtle predation.

SO, WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Participants were pleased to have the opportunity to gather during the 2023 QMTN Forum to discuss ideas, challenges and share their stories of success. As connections were made between groups, there was a strengthening of morale, understanding and hope for marine turtles in Australia and the people that contribute their time as citizen scientists. 100% of respondents indicated an interest to continue engaging in the QMTN.

The QMTN Steering Group has identified priority activities that they plan to progress on behalf of the Network. Many of these align with the Queensland Marine Turtle Conservation Strategy 2021-31.

THE STEERING GROUP WILL WORK TOWARDS THE FOLLOWING PRIORITIES IDENTIFIED AT THE FORUM:

1. The establishment of QMTN, independent of government bodies, with reliable funding established for coordination.
2. Enabling ongoing communications to support network connections e.g., by establishing a Closed Social Media Platform.
3. Coordination of marine turtle citizen science programs in Queensland (including training, resources, data sharing, annual debrief).
4. Supporting two-way information exchange between Department of Environment and Science and turtle groups (closing the data and communications loop).
5. Formal training opportunities that facilitate accreditation under Nature Conservation Act 1992 and provide more equitable access across Queensland.
6. Supporting access to contemporary research and management of threats to marine turtles.

The Queensland Marine Turtle Network - supporting the people who conserve marine turtles

MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK

Membership of the Network is free and open to all. If you would like to get involved in the Queensland Marine Turtle Network or connect with marine turtle groups in your local area, please contact us for more information.

QMTN: **qmtnforum@gmail.com**

Regional Strandings Coordinator: **GBRR-Strandings@des.qld.gov.au**

Nest to Ocean Turtle Protection Program: **TSAdmin@des.qld.gov.au**

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