Sea turtle Encounters

Mon Repos Conservation Park

This book is one of a number of educational and souvenir items associated with the turtle-watching program. Funds collected from the sales of all these products are used to support educational programs for nature conservation in Queensland. May the following pages entice you to visit Mon Repos or remind you of your own first-hand encounter with the Mon Repos turtles.

Sea turtle encounters

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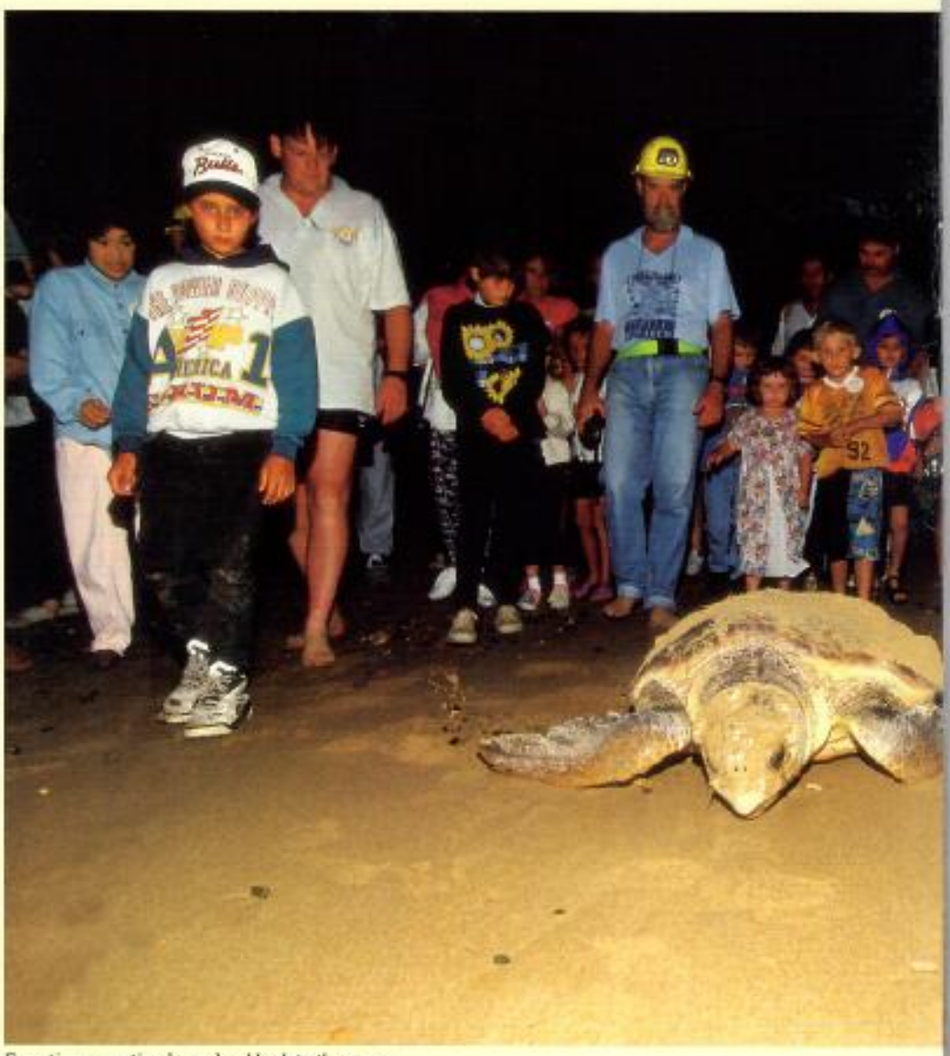
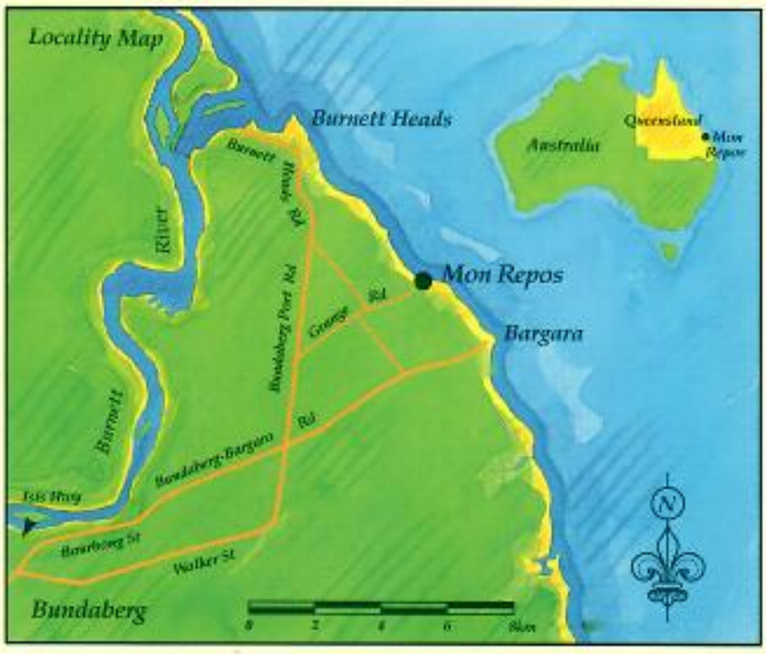
Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage



Escorting a nesting loggerhead back to the ocean.



After nesting the loggerhead returns to the more familiar territory of the ocean.

Mon Repos is Australia's best known and most accessible sea turtle rookery.

The Mon Repos turtle-watching program

On most nights each summer, from mid-November to early February, one of the world's most unusual animals — an ocean-going reptile complete with protective 'body armour' — can be seen struggling out of the sea to lay her eggs in the sand above high tide mark. About 7-9 weeks later the eggs hatch and hundreds of turtle hatchlings, tiny replicas of their lumbering parents, emerge from the sand and scamper down the beach to the sea.

This wonderful natural spectacle has been long recognised by residents of the Bundaberg area as a special part of the region's natural heritage. During the 1980s, several blocks of land adjacent to Mon Repos beach were declared an environmental park to protect the landward boundary of the rookery. Today this 45ha protected area is known as Mon Repos Conservation Park. In 1985 increasing crowds prompted the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service to begin a managed turtle-watching program in conjunction with sea turtle research conducted on the beachfront since the 1960s.

The turtle-watching program now caters for more than 25 000 visitors a season and is one of Queensland's most inspiring wildlife attractions. The Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage manages the program to ensure that visitors have an enjoyable and educational sea turtle encounter and to minimise disturbance to nesting sea turtles.

In 1993–94 a visitor centre including an extensive display area, souvenir shop and an outdoor amphitheatre was built to complement the turtle viewing and serve as a public education and information facility. A service fee was introduced in the 1994–95 season to help fund turtle-watching and sea turtle conservation programs.

Each summer several hundred sea turtles nest on the beaches along the Bundaberg coast from Round Hill Head to Elliot River.

Sea turtle nesting on the Bundaberg coast

Mon Repos beach, about 14km east of Bundaberg, is the most important nesting site along this coast. It supports the largest concentration of nesting sea turtles on the eastern Australian mainland and is one of the two largest loggerhead turtle rookeries in the South Pacific Ocean region.

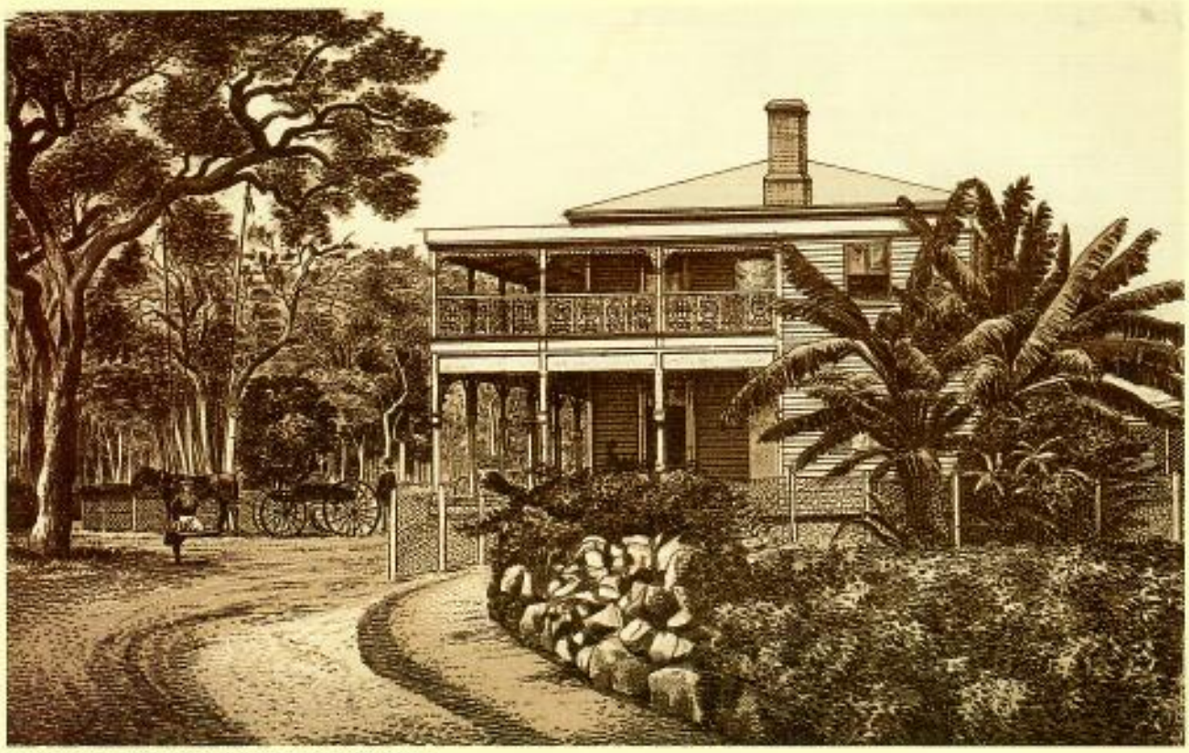
Successful breeding at Mon Repos and nearby beaches is critical for the survival of loggerhead turtle populations within the South Pacific. Without the turtle hatchlings, mostly females, produced from these beaches the loggerhead herds in our waters will slowly decline and disappear.

Loggerheads make up 95% of all nesting sea turtles along the Bundaberg coast. Each summer 160 to 200 visit Mon Repos to lay their eggs in the sand above high tide mark.

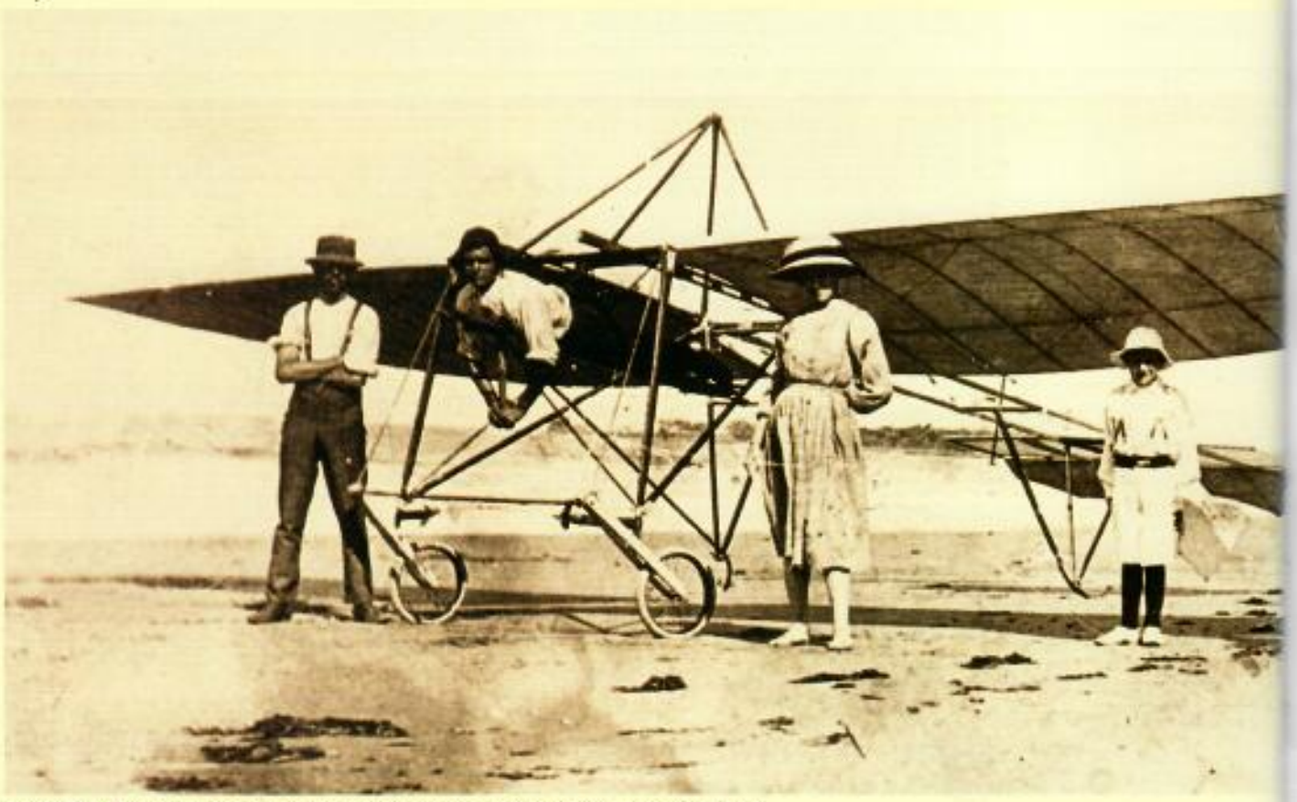
Flatback and green turtles also nest along the Bundaberg coast but in much smaller numbers. Only five to ten flatbacks and three or fewer greens visit Mon Repos each season.

In addition to these three species, the giant leatherback turtle occasionally nests on the sandy beaches to the north of Mon Repos.

***Top left:** Green turtles, the most numerous nesters in the southern Great Barrier Reef, make up less than 1% of turtles nesting on Bundaberg beaches. **Top right:** Flatback turtles make up less than 4-5% of nesting turtles along the Bundaberg coast and are only found in Australian waters. **Bottom right:** Mon Repos' most common nesters, the loggerheads, make up about 95% of the turtle population on Bundaberg beaches. **Bottom left:** The giant leatherback, rarely recorded in Australia, may nest very occasionally on the mainland coast near Bundaberg. **Background:** Mon Repos beach.*



Mon Repos, A.P.Barton's summer residence late 1800s.



In 1912 at Mon Repos, well-known aviator Bert Hinkler (pictured in glider) made his first flight.

Above: Gooreng Gooreng people 1930–40.
Below: Today's elders.

The Bunda Bunda clan of the Gooreng Gooreng Aboriginal language group were the traditional occupants of the Mon Repos area. Their middens, the heaped remains of discarded stone artefacts, and the shells of oysters, pippies and cockles, have been found in several places behind the foredunes.

Early encounters

The turtle nesting season was an important occasion for Aboriginal people. Many of the Gooreng Gooreng from other areas would have gathered at Mon Repos during this time for festive ceremonies and to take advantage of the abundant supply of turtle eggs.

When white settlers first became aware of the Mon Repos rookery is not recorded. However, it was certainly locally well-known by the late 1800s. In 1884 grazier Augustus Purling Barton built his two-storey summer residence Mon Repos *(French for My Rest) behind the rookery beach which now takes the name of his home.*

In 1912, Mon Repos was the site for Bundaberg-born aviator Bert Hinkler's first flight. Hinkler went on to international fame when he became the first person to fly solo from England to Australia in 1928.

During the 1900s, as the community of Bundaberg grew, evening visits to Mon Repos beach during the nesting season became a local tradition. Word spread and by 1974 Mr Jim McCutcheon opened the Turtle Sands Caravan Park next to the rookery to provide on-site accommodation for Mon Repos visitors.

The Queensland Turtle Research Program, originally sponsored by Kelvin Grove Teachers' College and now funded by the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage, began at Mon Repos in 1968. From the outset research staff always took the opportunity to explain turtle behaviour and their research activity to visitors on the beach. Together with the need to manage growing crowds this led to the formalisation of the turtle-watching program in 1985 and its development into today's environmental tourist attraction.

At Mon Repos nesting occurs on most nights from mid-November to early February. Favoured times are between 8pm and midnight when the moon is full or new and the tides are high.

Viewing the nesting ritual … a unique performance

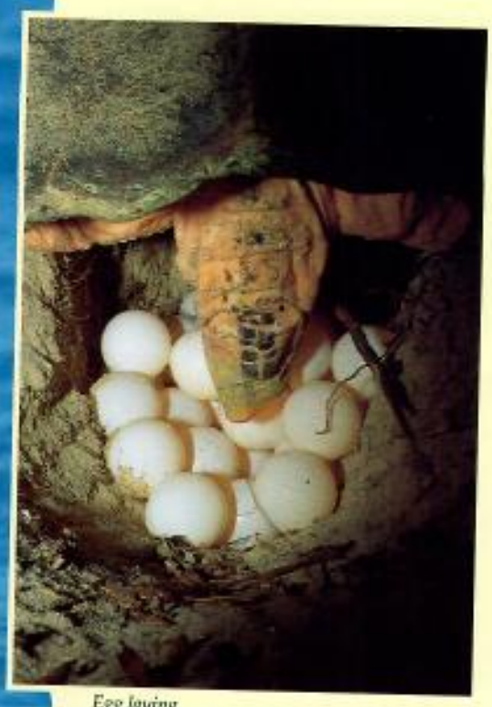
Under the guidance of trained park staff, visitors to Mon Repos are escorted onto the beach in groups of up to 70. To avoid disturbing the timid turtles as they come ashore the groups move quietly and slowly along the beach without torches.

When the turtle selected for viewing begins digging a large depression (body pit) the group is arranged in a semi-circle around her — close enough to see but not so close that she becomes disturbed.

Over the next hour to an hour and three-quarters an amazing nesting ritual is revealed. After the body pit is dug the turtle skilfully excavates a vertical pear-shaped egg chamber where she lays her round, leathery eggs. During the laying process the turtle will tolerate soft lights and occasional gentle touching as park staff identify her and take measurements.

After the last egg drops she uses her rear flippers to fill the chamber with sand which she pats down firmly on top. Next, sand might fly as she uses all four flippers to cover the body pit.

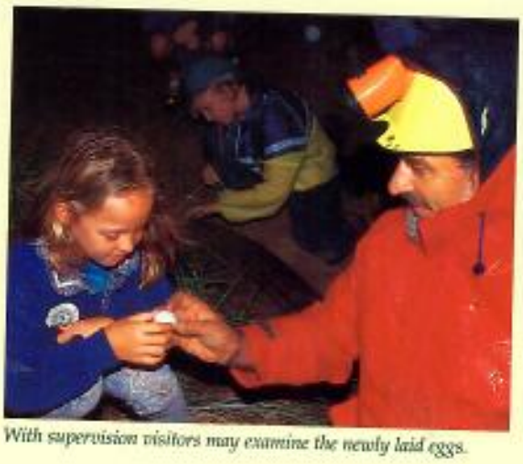
The encounter ends as the group quietly follows her to the water's edge as she returns to the sea.



Egg laying.

Limited gentle touching is permitted after the turtle has laid.

Patting down the sand which covers the egg chamber.



With supervision visitors may examine the newly laid eggs.

Visitors watch as a ranger measures the length of a nesting loggerhead.

Hints for successful turtle-watching

Turtles are easily disturbed by lights and movement, especially when leaving the water, crossing the beach and digging nest chambers. To have a successful turtle-watching experience visitors should follow these simple rules.

- *Keep the use of lights to an absolute minimum; carry only a small, low-powered torch.*
- *Do not approach closely or shine lights on turtles leaving the sea or moving up the beach.*
- *Avoid excess noise and sudden movement.*
- *Be patient while the turtle performs her nesting ritual. The larger the crowd, the more likely the turtle will be disturbed.*
- *Wait until the turtle is laying before shining lights or touching her. Keep this to a minimum.*

During nesting the identification tag of each turtle is recorded.

After the female turtle covers her nest and returns to the sea her eggs are incubated by the warm sand for about eight weeks. Turtle hatchlings begin appearing on Mon Repos beach in January and can be seen between 8pm and 12 midnight on most nights until mid-March.

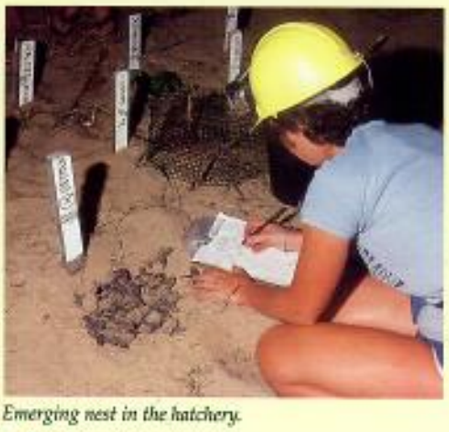
Hatchling emergence ... the race down the beach

When park staff locate emerging hatchlings a group of up to 70 visitors is assembled in a broad semi-circle around the nest to witness the event. The tiny turtles usually struggle to the surface in a group taking 5–10 minutes to empty the nest.

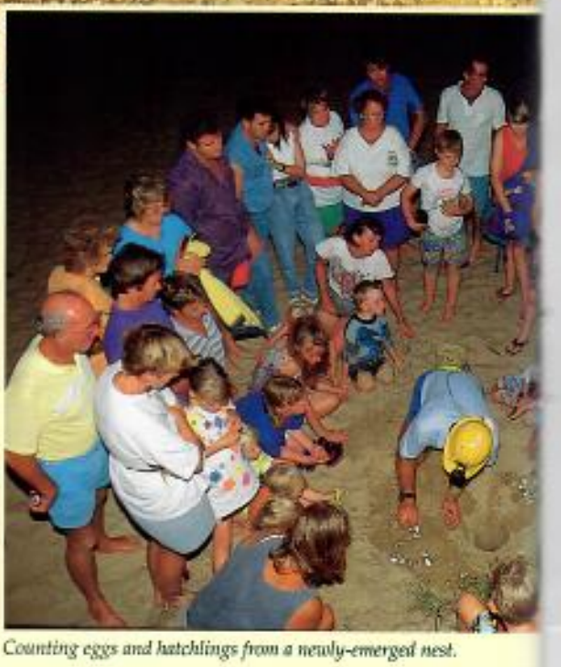
To enable counts to be made and to ensure that hatchlings are not confused by the presence of so many people, park staff usually keep the newly-emerged hatchlings in a small mesh enclosure until the nest is empty. After this visitors form into two lines leading down the beach and the hatchlings are released between them.

Up to 150 tiny hatchlings then scurry towards the ocean as fast as possible, reaching the water in a few minutes. This is just the beginning of their long and dangerous journey far out to sea. Less than 1 in 1000 are estimated to survive to return as adults to breed and nest at Mon Repos.

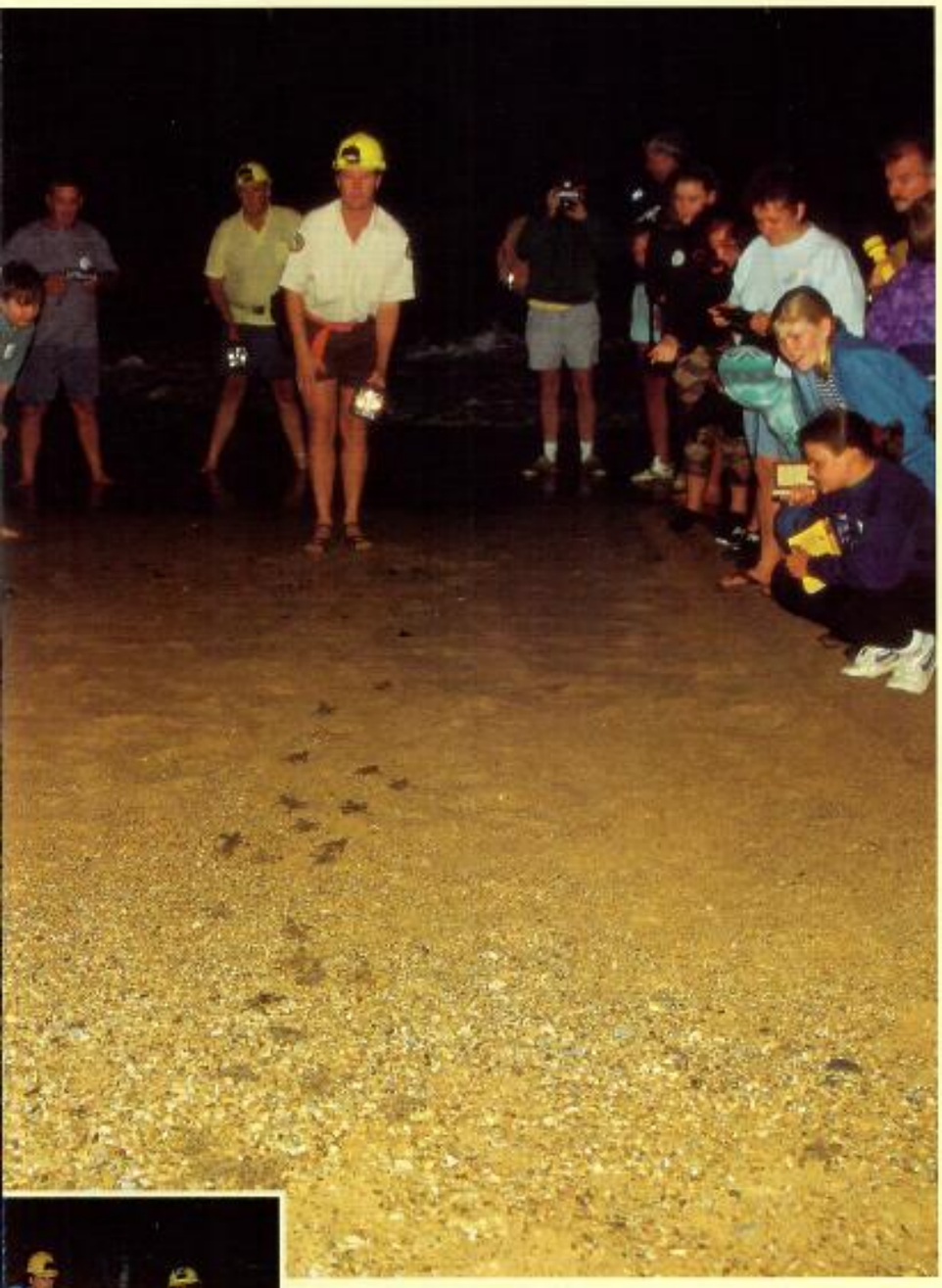
As hatchlings are disorientated by lights used incorrectly, park staff provide illumination and visitors keep their torches off unless otherwise directed.



Emerging nest in the hatchery.



Counting eggs and hatchlings from a newly-emerged nest.



Left: *Hatchlings scurry towards the ocean between two rows of visitors.*
Insets top to bottom: *flatback hatchlings, loggerhead hatchling, green hatchlings.*

Hints for watching hatchlings

When you see a nest emerging please follow these guidelines:

- *Stand back from the nest. If you approach too closely you may crush the hatchlings still underneath the sand.*
- *Extinguish all lights otherwise the hatchlings will become disorientated and be led away from the sea.*
- *Let the hatchlings make their own way down the beach; do not pick them up and carry them down.*

Hatchlings are attracted to lights and can be disorientated by incorrectly used torches or lamps.

In 1993 the Department of Environment and Heritage built an information centre at Mon Repos Conservation Park to complement the turtle-watching program and serve as a public education and information facility.

Mon Repos Information Centre

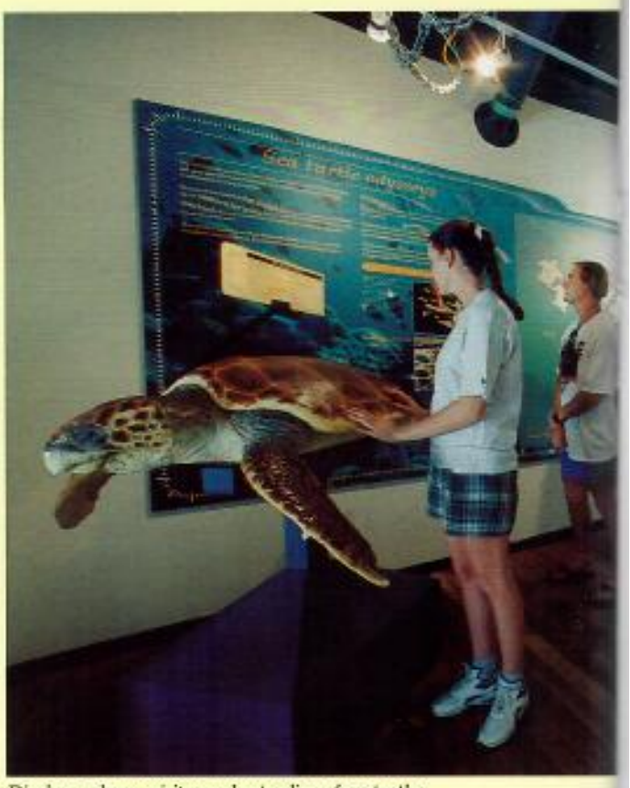
Designed to blend with the low and gently undulating sandy landscape the building has a curved roof line and extensive areas of wooden decking and walkways to aid access to the beach. To avoid disorientating nesting turtles all external lighting is minimised and designed not to attract loggerhead hatchlings. The centre includes a souvenir shop, a large display area and an outdoor amphitheatre.

During turtle season, night access to the rookery is through the information centre. On arrival, each visitor is given a numbered sticker which identifies their turtle-watching group. While waiting their turn to go onto the beach visitors browse through the shop, look at the displays and watch slide shows and videos in the outdoor amphitheatre.

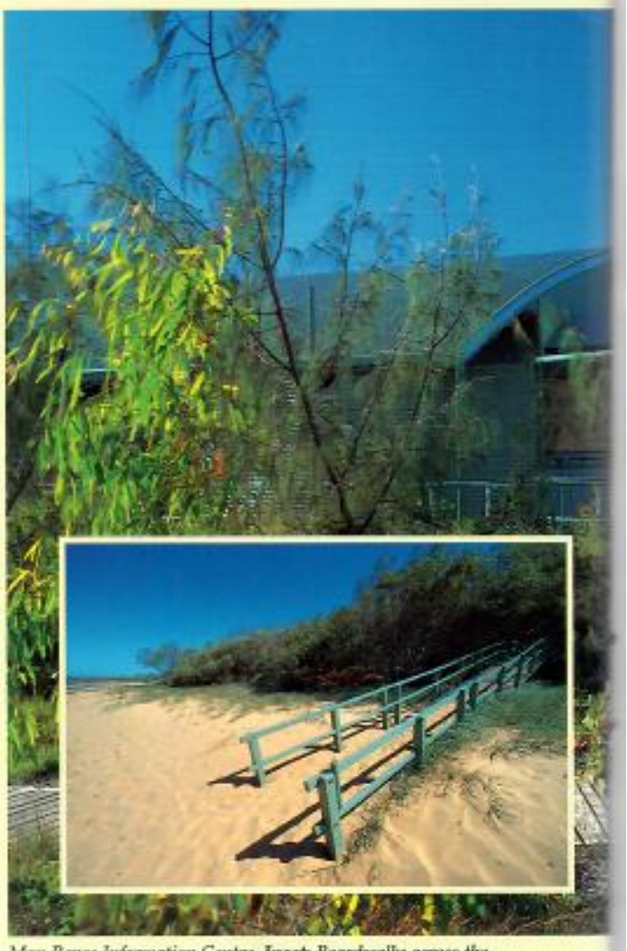
The displays and audio/visual presentations were created to help people understand sea turtles and their plight, particularly in Queensland but also in the South Pacific. Topics include nesting behaviour and breeding migrations, life history, biology and evolution, sea turtle research and conservation problems.

When their numbers are called, visitors are escorted onto the beach in groups of up to 70. Here experienced staff provide direction and explanations during the turtle encounter.

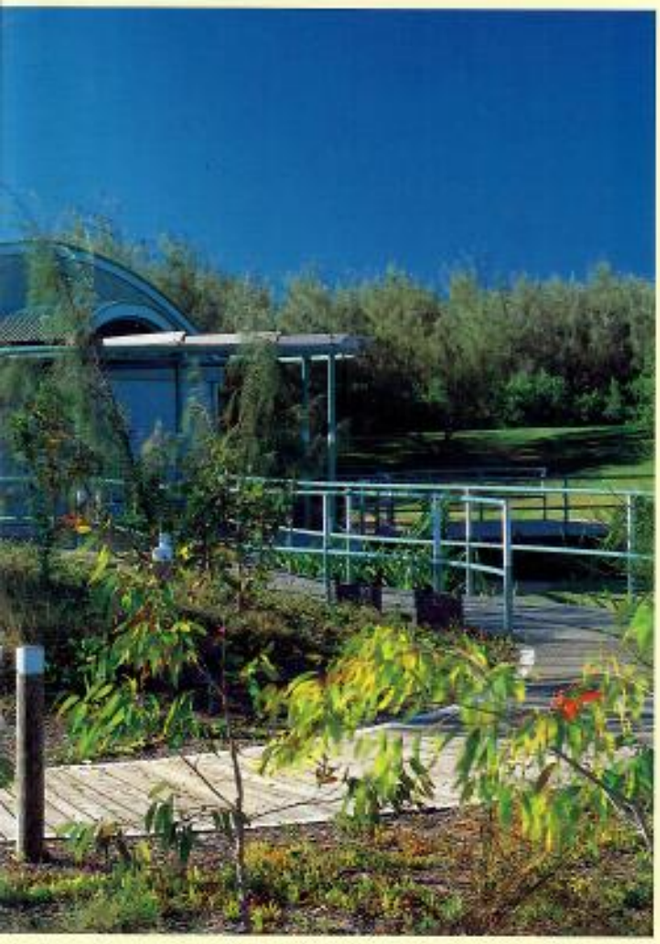
During turtle nesting season from early November to the end of March, the information centre is open from 7pm seven nights a week. At other times it is open only by prior arrangement.



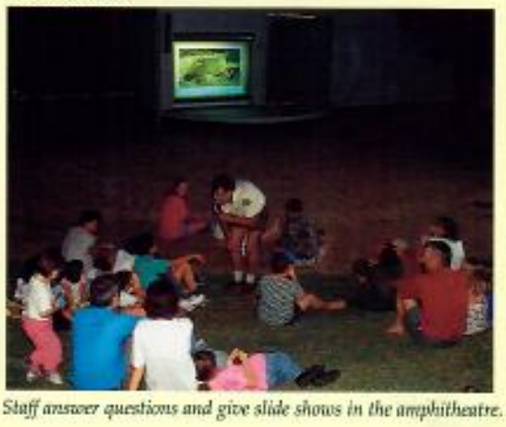
Displays enhance visitor understanding of sea turtles.



Mon Repos Information Centre. ***Inset:*** *Boardwalks across the foredunes connect the Centre with the rookery beach.*



The information centre shop stocks a range of educational and souvenir items.



Staff answer questions and give slide shows in the amphitheatre.

The Queensland Government first protected' part of the Mon Repos area by declaring Mon Repos Environmental Park in March 1981. This park was expanded several times in the following years to include more foredunes overlooking Mon Repos beach, low-lying sandy country behind the dunes, an estuary and a small rocky headland.

Mon Repos Conservation Park

Now called Mon Repos Conservation Park, the 45ha reserve protects the landward boundary of the Mon Repos rookery and provides a critical buffer zone between the beach and potential suburban development along the coastline. It also preserves Aboriginal middens and the best surviving example of a Kanaka-built rock wall.

Shallow ponds and a mangrove-lined estuary in the park provide habitat for a variety of birds including chestnut teal ducks, Caspian terns, curlew sandpipers, eastern curlews, mangrove warblers, mangrove bitterns and swamphens.

Rangers from the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service, a branch of the Department of Environment and Heritage, manage the park.

Kanaka wall.

Top left: *Mangrove flower.* ***Top right:*** *Swamphen.* ***Middle:*** *Spoonbill.* ***Bottom:*** *Extensive planting of coastal sheoaks has stabilised the foredunes and provided a natural screen reducing light spill onto the rookery beach.* ***Background:*** *Mon Repos from the air.*


Mon Repos Conservation Park
Parking
Information
Conservation Park
Main nesting area
Rocks
Walking track
Mon Repos Information Centre
Kanaka soaff
Park access road
Turtle Sands Caravan Park
Woongarra Marine Park
Bundaberg 14km
Entrance
Estuary
Scale in metres
0 100 200 300 400 500
N

Zones

Woongarra Marine Park

Woongarra Marine Park is divided into three zones and three management areas.

***General use zone** — All reasonable recreational and commercial activities allowed.*

***Habitat protection zone** — Trawling and mining not permitted.*

***Conservation park zone** — Trawling and mining not permitted, fishing restricted to two hand-held rods with a single hook, fly or lure per person.*

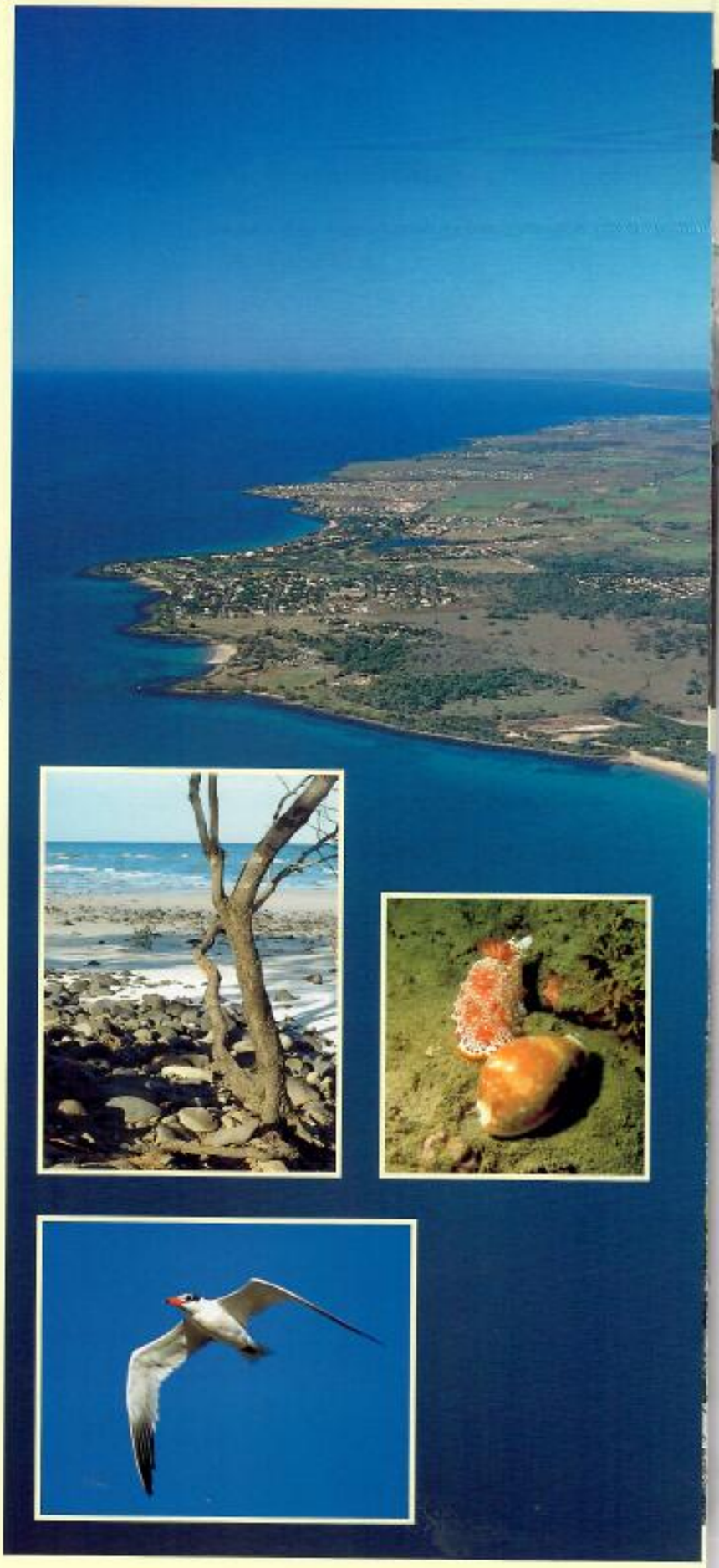
***General monitoring area** — From 15 October to 30 April each year the effect of trawling on sea turtles is monitored throughout the park.*

***Protection area** — Within the park trawling is not allowed within one nautical mile of the shore during November, December and January.*

***Mon Repos protection area** — From 15 October to 30 April each year special restrictions are placed on activities in the area from high tide to 300 metres seaward of Mon Repos beach as follows:*

- *No vehicles or domestic animals are allowed on the beach.*
- *Boating, swimming and fishing are not allowed.*
- *At night lights are limited to one handheld electric torch per person. Any other light sources that change the natural light horizon enough to disorientate turtles are prohibited.*

Management areas



Woongarra Marine Park was declared in December 1991 mainly to protect sea turtles in their internesting habitat offshore from Mon Repos during the breeding season.

Woongarra Marine Park

Female sea turtles lay several times a season. In between visits to the beach they usually spend about two weeks near their rookery maturing their next batch of eggs.

During this phase they are very vulnerable to disturbance by trawlers. Before the marine park was declared, large numbers of loggerheads were caught by prawn trawlers operating next to Mon Repos each summer. Many of these turtles drowned.

The park also protects the rocky basalt reefs fringing the Woongarra coastline and the small sandy inlets and estuaries between the Burnett and Elliot Rivers.

Below the low tide mark the basalt slabs and boulders are covered with algae and corals providing a rich habitat for fish and other marine animals. In the intertidal zone barnacles and snails cover the rocks. Shallow tide pools contain a host of anemones, soft corals, whelks, chitons and limpets.

The mangrove-fringed inlets, although altered by neighbouring use, are still nursery grounds for fish and crustaceans. They also provide habitat for a variety of birds such as eastern curlews and mangrove bitterns.

Blue dragon nudibranch.

Top left: *Basalt boulders and beach near Elliot River.*
Top right: *Cowrie and nudibranch.* ***Bottom:*** *Caspian tern.*
Background: *Looking south across the western boundary of the park.*

Soon after hatching the tiny sea turtles disappear from the shallow waters near their rookeries. They are rarely seen again for many years, in the case of loggerheads 15–20 years. During this time they drift with the ocean currents feeding on large planktonic animals near the water surface. However, as observations are so infrequent, little is known of these 'lost years'.

Sea turtle life cycle

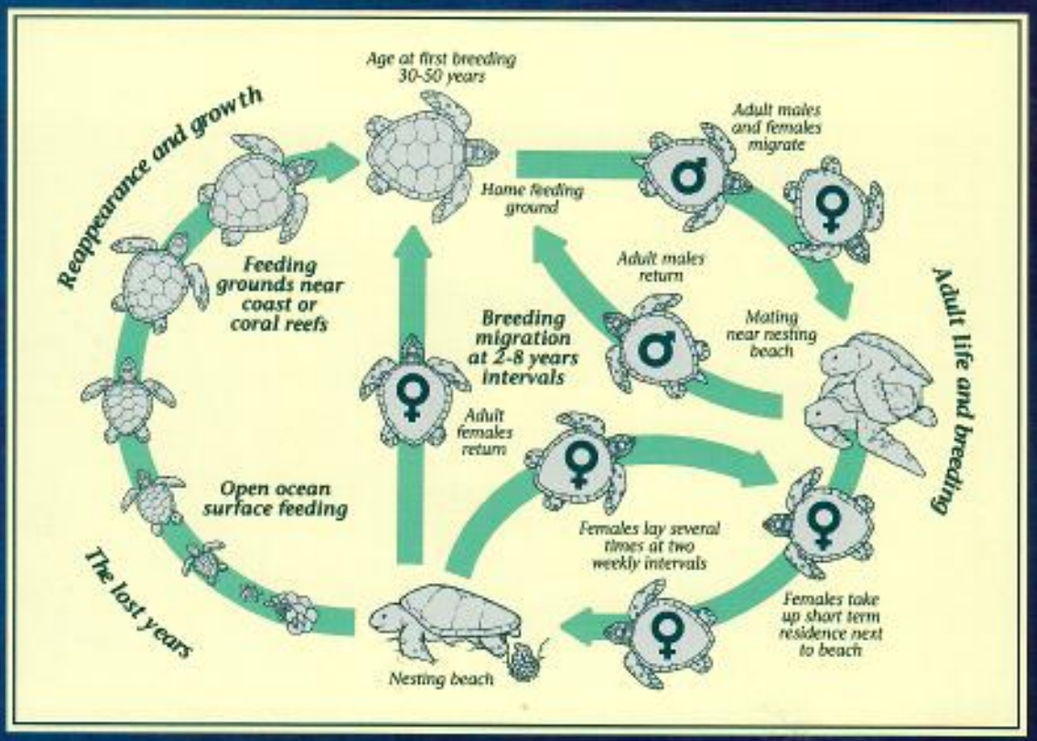
When young loggerheads reappear and take up residence in the shallow water habitats of coastal or coral reefs they are about the size of a small bicycle wheel, 70–80cm long. These immature sea turtles might remain in one feeding ground for several years before moving to another area. Several shifts can occur during this phase which lasts for 10–20 years.

Sea turtles will be 30–50 years old before they begin breeding. At this stage an adult loggerhead has a shell 90–95cm long.

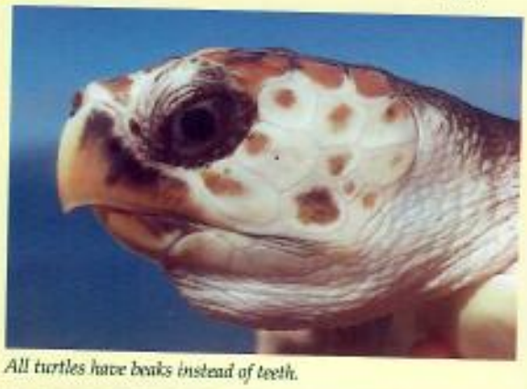
Every two to eight years depending on conditions these mature turtles undertake a breeding migration from their home feeding areas to their traditional nesting beaches. These journeys range from 50–3000km. The turtles migrating to Mon Repos come from feeding areas as far away as Indonesia and New Caledonia or as close as Hervey Bay.

The number of migrations sea turtles will undertake during their lifespan is not known with certainty as their maximum breeding lives have yet to be measured. However, it is likely that they breed for many decades.

Above: *Twelve-month-old hand-reared loggerhead about 25cm long.* ***Top right:*** *Mating loggerhead turtles.* ***Middle right:*** *Immature green turtle in its home feeding ground on the Great Barrier Reef.* ***Bottom left:*** *Adult male loggerhead sighted at Heron Reef.* ***Background:*** *Swimming out to sea.*


Age at first breeding
30-50 years
Adult males
and females
migrate
Home feeding
ground
Adult males
return
Mating
near nesting
beach
Breeding
migration
at 2-8 years
intervals
Adult
females
return
Females lay several
times at two
weekly intervals
Females take
up short term
residence next
to beach
Nesting beach
The lost years
Open ocean
surface feeding
Feeding
grounds near
coast or
coral reefs
Reappearance and growth
Adult life and breeding

Special glands near the eye excrete excess salt in turtle tears.

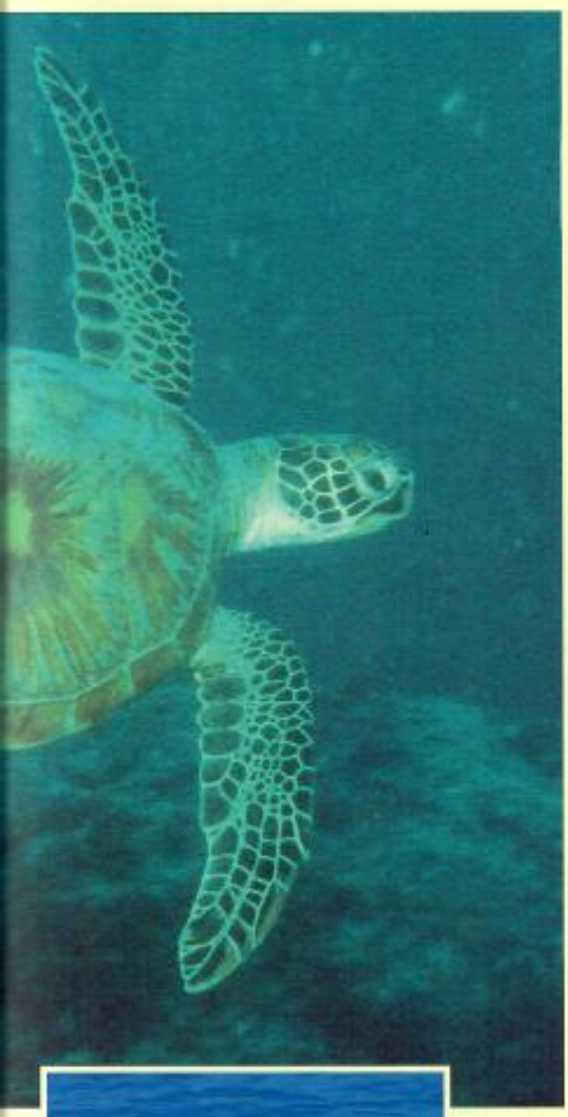


All turtles have beaks instead of teeth.

On land rear flippers are used as scoops to dig the egg chamber.

Sea turtles have low-domed streamlined shells, front flippers which function as fin-shaped paddles and rear flippers which work as broad rudders.

The largest sea turtle, the giant leatherback, can grow to 2m long.



Turtles breathe air.

The smallest sea turtle, the olive ridley, grows 65-75cm long.

Sea turtles are reptiles which live almost exclusively in the sea. Seven species are alive today and all are superbly adapted to life in the oceans.

Sea turtle anatomy

Their shells are low-domed, streamlined and light, maximising buoyancy and agility in water. With the exception of the leatherback, upper and lower portions of a turtle's shell are composed of flattened bones covered by horny plates. The leatherback shell contains numerous small bones embedded in a tough skin.

A sea turtle's front flippers function as very strong, fin-shaped paddles which propel the animal rapidly through the water. They move like bird wings upward-backward and forward-downward.

The rear flippers are like broad rudders. They contain toe bones flexible enough to steer the turtle through the water. During nesting the rear flippers are used in a hand-like action to scoop out the egg chamber.

Turtles drink seawater and therefore take in large quantities of salt. Special salt glands beside the tear duct on the eye excrete the excess salt in a very concentrated solution. When they are on land the salty liquid gives the appearance of 'tears'.

Like all other reptiles sea turtles breathe air. As they need to dive for food and protection they have developed the ability to hold their breaths for long periods. Loggerheads dive to 233m and have been known to remain under for 21 minutes.

In addition to these special adaptions for life in the ocean, sea turtles, like all turtles, have a beak instead of teeth. Its shape depends on what they eat. In green turtles, which like seaweeds and seagrasses, the edges of the beak fit together so they operate like a pair of shears allowing the turtle to seize and bite off pieces of food. Loggerheads have bony plates on their palates which allow their jaws to operate like crushing vices when they bite down on shellfish, crabs and sea urchins.

This program began in December 1968 at Mon Repos and was expanded in 1974 to include the Heron Island rookery. Experiences gained at Mon Repos now guide research at other major Queensland rookeries including Wreck, Raine, Bountiful and Milman Islands.

The Queensland Turtle Research Program

The program, originally sponsored by the Kelvin Grove Teachers' College, is funded by the Department of Environment and Heritage. In addition to Department staff, numerous students, teachers and others from the community contribute valuable services as voluntary assistants. Scientists and wildlife conservation managers from other countries and elsewhere in Australia contribute through collaborative research.

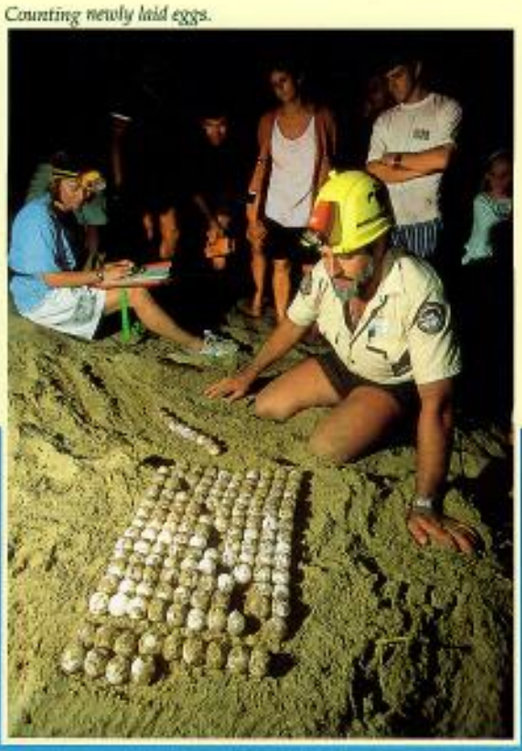
Many interrelated projects and activities are involved including reproductive and migration studies of tagged turtles, annual surveys of nesting turtles, behavioural studies, incubation studies including sex determination of hatchlings, and genetic studies.

Mon Repos is an important training centre for research program volunteers and wildlife managers from the Indo-Pacific region. Volunteers from Mon Repos assist with Department sea turtle research throughout Queensland. International managers learn skills and techniques they can employ in their own countries' sea turtle research and management activities. As Australia shares its sea turtle populations with neighbouring countries, Mon Repos' international training function is very important for promoting co-operative and informed joint management of the Indo-Pacific sea turtle herds.

Weighing an adult female turtle.

Laparoscopes allow researchers to examine internal organs without causing harm. ***Inset:*** *Adult loggerhead ovary viewed by laparoscope.*

Counting newly laid eggs.



Incubation studies.

The Mon Repos hatchery.

All nesting turtles which visit Mon Repos are tagged.

Titanium tag.

Sea turtles were abundant in many areas of the world some centuries ago. Unfortunately, through lack of understanding, people have over-exploited many populations resulting in their decline or in some cases extinction.

Threats to sea turtle survival

Through its remoteness, Australia escaped the heavy exploitation of its sea turtles last century. However, the populations which inhabit our waters and those of nearby countries are now under threat as a result of a combination of human-related factors.

Food, souvenirs and tortoiseshell (hawksbill turtle shell) harvests in countries near Australia currently pose a considerable threat to the region's turtle populations. Improvements in fishing technology and the growth of large scale industries in which sea turtle products are sold for profit have meant that sea turtles, particularly greens and hawksbills, have become locally scarce.

Along Australia's east coast, urban and resort development and feral animals have caused several problems for sea turtle rookeries. Artificial lights are a major concern as they disorient nesting adults and hatchlings. Pigs, dogs and foxes easily locate freshly-laid eggs which they dig up and eat.

Rubbish is also a threat. Turtles become tangled in old nets and fishing line strangling and drowning them. If turtles mistakenly eat plastic bags their intestines become blocked and they starve to death.

Accidental drowning in prawn trawling nets and other fishing gear is thought to be the most common cause of mortality for eastern Australian loggerheads. This population has declined 50–80 percent in the last 10–15 years.

Although the pressures of escalating human populations, development and consumerism could eliminate turtles from the wild and even drive them into extinction, there is still a chance. In addition to the conservation programs carried out by the Department and other organisations in the South Pacific, you can help personally. *Turn to page 25 for advice.*

Green turtle slaughter PNG.

Collecting eggs.

Fox-predated nest.

Turtles caught in trawl net.

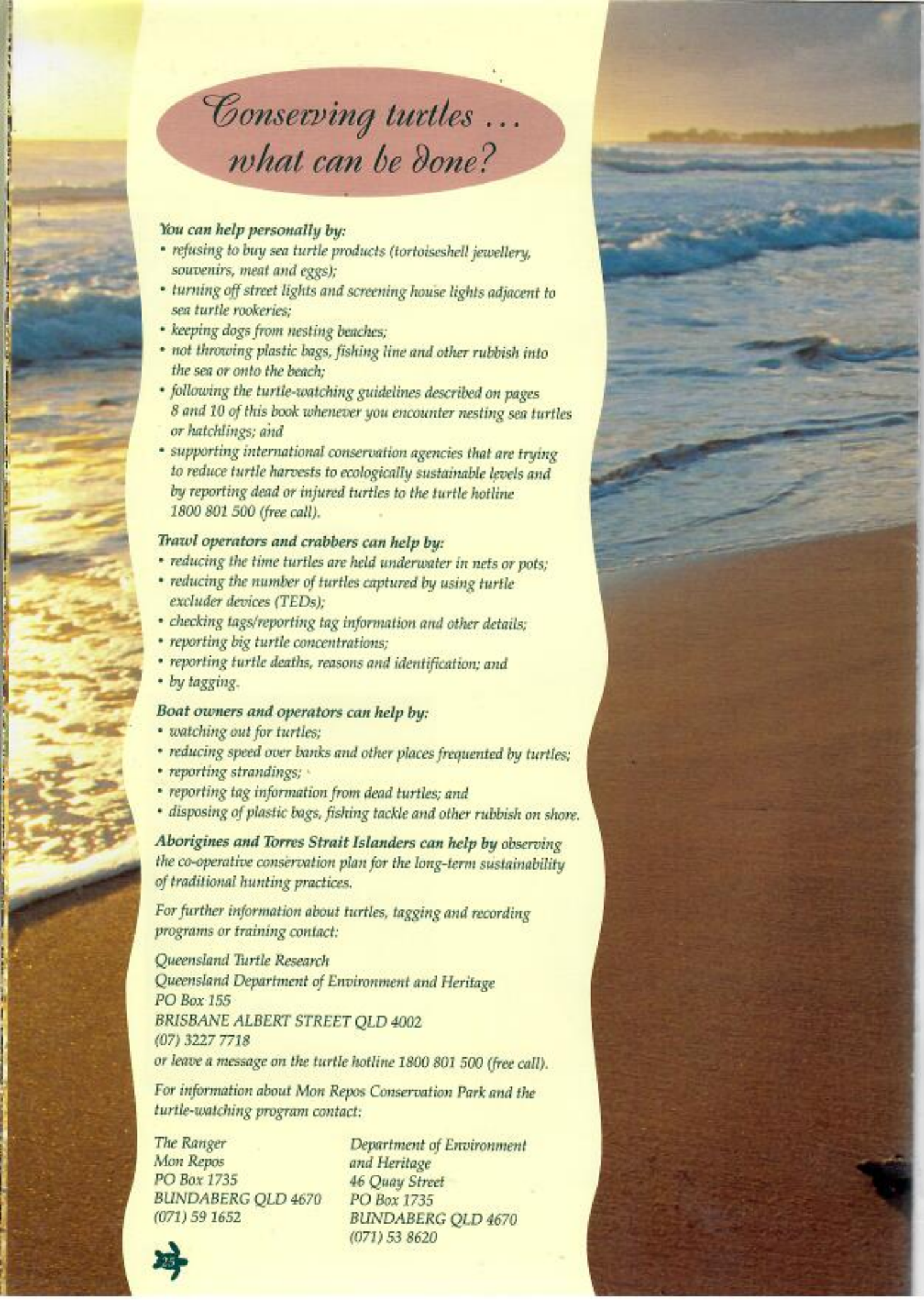
Japanese tortoiseshell (hawksbill turtle shell) industry.

Green turtle caught in a crab pot.

Raw tortoiseshell (hawksbill turtle shell) for sale.

Propeller damage.

Turtle shell souvenir.



Conserving turtles ... what can be done?

You can help personally by:

- *refusing to buy sea turtle products (tortoiseshell jewellery, souvenirs, meat and eggs);*
- *turning off street lights and screening house lights adjacent to sea turtle rookeries;*
- *keeping dogs from nesting beaches;*
- *not throwing plastic bags, fishing line and other rubbish into the sea or onto the beach;*
- *following the turtle-watching guidelines described on pages 8 and 10 of this book whenever you encounter nesting sea turtles or hatchlings; and*
- *supporting international conservation agencies that are trying to reduce turtle harvests to ecologically sustainable levels and by reporting dead or injured turtles to the turtle hotline 1800 801 500 (free call).*

Trawl operators and crabbers can help by:

- *reducing the time turtles are held underwater in nets or pots;*
- *reducing the number of turtles captured by using turtle excluder devices (TEDs);*
- *checking tags/reporting tag information and other details;*
- *reporting big turtle concentrations;*
- *reporting turtle deaths, reasons and identification; and*
- *by tagging.*

Boat owners and operators can help by:

- *watching out for turtles;*
- *reducing speed over banks and other places frequented by turtles;*
- *reporting strandings;*
- *reporting tag information from dead turtles; and*
- *disposing of plastic bags, fishing tackle and other rubbish on shore.*

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders can help by *observing the co-operative conservation plan for the long-term sustainability of traditional hunting practices.*

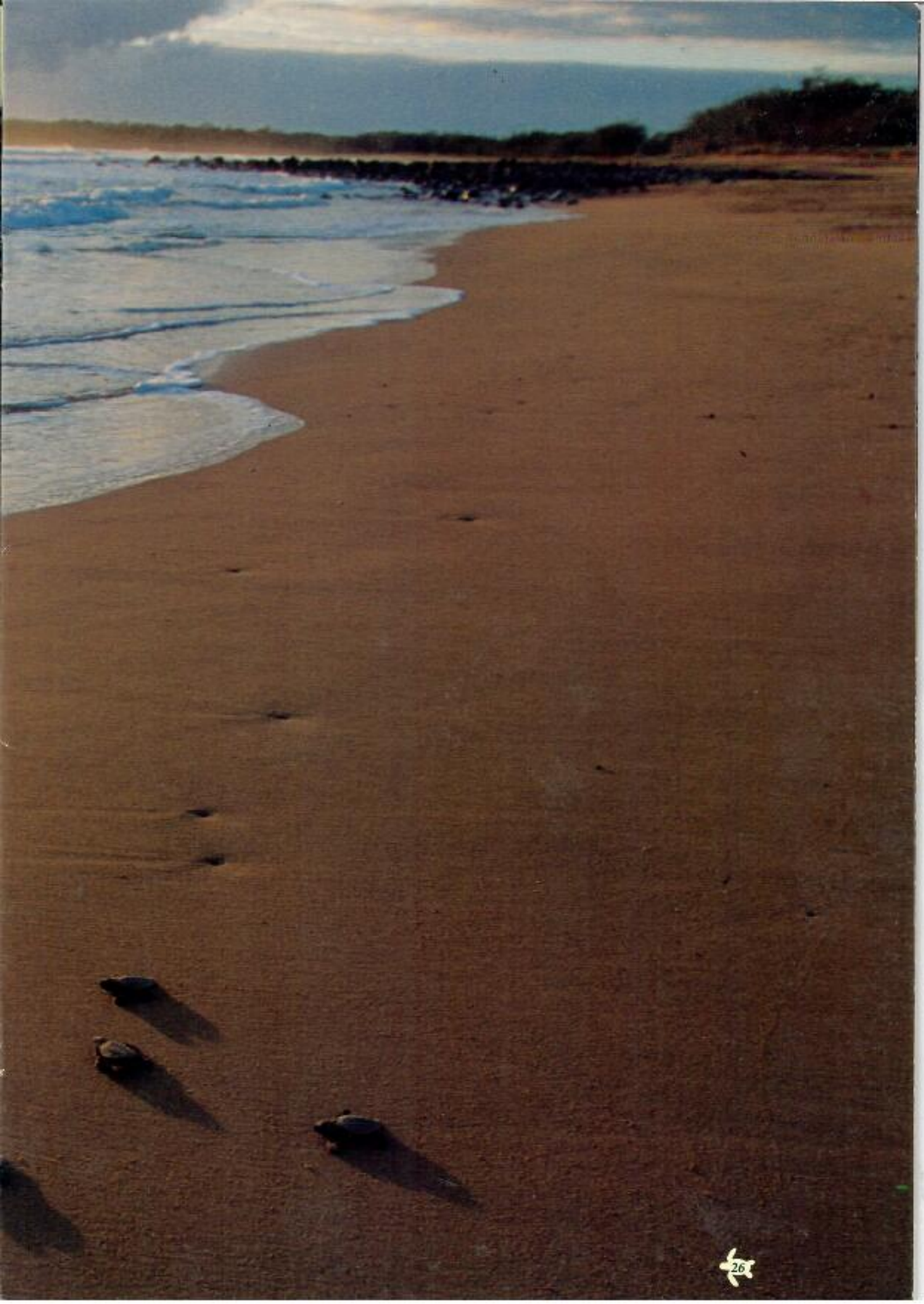
For further information about turtles, tagging and recording programs or training contact:

Queensland Turtle Research
Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage
PO Box 155
BRISBANE ALBERT STREET QLD 4002
(07) 3227 7718
or leave a message on the turtle hotline 1800 801 500 (free call).

For information about Mon Repos Conservation Park and the turtle-watching program contact:

The Ranger
Mon Repos
PO Box 1735
BUNDABERG QLD 4670
(071) 59 1652

Department of Environment and Heritage
46 Quay Street
PO Box 1735
BUNDABERG QLD 4670
(071) 53 8620

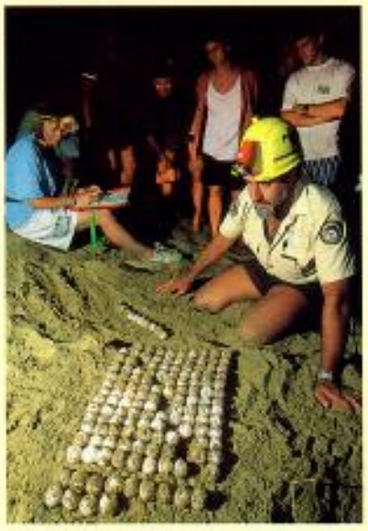


Sea turtle Encounters

Mon Repos, the largest sea turtle rookery on the Australian mainland, is on the central Queensland coast near Bundaberg. Each summer up to 200 turtles visit Mon Repos beach to lay their eggs in the sand above high tide. It is one of the two largest loggerhead turtle rookeries in the South Pacific Ocean region.

Visit the rookery and witness the nesting ritual, a unique and carefully choreographed performance. See tiny hatchlings struggle out of the nests and race down the beach to the sea. Browse through the information centre and learn about turtles.

Come to Mon Repos for your turtle encounter.



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