

# Turtle conservation researcher Col Limpus from Mon Repos rookery retires

ABC Wide Bay / By Lucy Loram

Posted Mon 23 Dec 2024 at 8:22pm



Col Limpus says he never intended to get into the field of turtle research. *(Supplied: Queensland government)*

If turtle research had a hall of fame, Col Limpus's picture would be hung in prime position.

The 84-year-old academic has committed decades to uncovering the migratory

Get the ABC News app for the latest news and live notifications. →

"I didn't start off with that as an intent," Dr Limpus recalled.

"I studied physics and majored in nuclear atomic physics, which was the 'in' thing in the Cold War era, and then went out as a high school teacher.

"I thought I was going to eventually become director general of education."



Dr Limpus began working with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service in the mid-70s. *(Supplied: Queensland government)*

But a teaching stint at Atherton, surrounded by the picturesque rainforests in

Get the ABC News app for the latest news and live notifications. →

"I had grown up on the beaches of Bundaberg with a lot of turtles," he said.

"I was asked if I'd like to take on a little four-year study of flatback [turtles] and I thought, 'Yeah, I could do that during the school holidays', so I started that ... and got suckered in."

By 1974, he had joined the Queensland Parks Service as a marine biologist, working on projects including Great Barrier Reef conservation and crocodile research, before becoming the department's chief scientist.

"I never realised that I was going to end up as a major researcher with sea turtles. It certainly hadn't been in my game plan back then," Dr Limpus said.



Get the ABC News app for the latest news and live notifications. →

He was invited to be an executive on the International Union for Conservation's specialist sea turtle group in the late 70s.

He also spent 25 years advising the United Nations Convention on a treaty for migratory species.

In 2020, he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia for his work in environmental science.

"It certainly took me into areas that I never planned on, travelling widely," Dr Limpus said.

"But it was the science that was really exciting."

Dr Limpus forged a path for eco-tourism at Mon Repos Turtle Centre, on the Bundaberg coast. (ABC

Get the ABC News app for the latest news and live notifications. →

Amid a catalogue of achievements, Dr Limpas said it was an investigation into turtle reproductive behaviours that stood out as a career highlight.

It was a practice in patience that ultimately changed the way the world viewed a turtle's maturity.

"When we started, we thought turtles were about 10 years old when they started breeding, but no-one was sure," he recalled.

"We started a program where we tagged a quarter of a million hatchling turtles to find out how old they are when they breed, and [whether] they come back to the beach where they lay."

He said as the years ticked by it became clear that the turtles would not reach adulthood in just one decade.

"We had to sit around and twiddle our thumbs, waiting for these turtles to grow up," he chuckled.

"We had to wait 29 years until the first turtle that we tagged as a hatchling walked up on the beach at Mon Repos to lay [eggs].

"That was a memorable occasion ... we were creating new information, but also [seeing through a] 30-year study."

## **A change in technology**

Technology has changed dramatically since Dr Limpus embarked on his career, which he said had both pros and cons in the conservation space.

"Being able to track animals with satellite tracking, these are things we never dreamed of when we started ... but the goalposts have kept shifting," he said.

"Before the 70s, if people wanted to hunt for turtles, you paddled a wooden canoe ... but after the 70s we've got aluminium dinghies with 40hp outboards — and so it changed the whole hunting capacity.

"Simple things like having an underwater torch completely changed the capacity to [research] turtles at night ... but nowadays everything is wrapped in plastic, and that plastic is turning up as marine debris and is a major source of mortality of turtle species globally.

"It's one of those consequences of changing lifestyle for the human population."

Despite the impact of climate change on turtles, Dr Limpus said he was leaving the animals better than when he found them with some populations recovering over that time.

"I think collectively it's looking a lot better than it was 40 or 50 years ago, but we've got particular populations that are not doing well," he said.

## **The future of turtle conservation**

As he steps away from a field that has consumed three-quarters of his life, Dr Limpus was content the turtles' future was in good hands.

"It's been a pleasure to be able to supervise postgraduate students," he said.

"While they've been benefiting from working in our program, they've been continually teaching us new things — it's a two-way exchange of information.

"People say, 'Aren't you worried that when you stop working, things won't continue?'

"My reaction is that things will continue because there are so many high-quality graduates out there."

## **Related Stories**