

Collaborative research

demonstrates that turtle harvesting in the Maningrida region is sustainable

Last year saw the completion of an Australian Research Council funded collaborative research project involving the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC), Djelk Rangers and the Institute for Applied Ecology (University of Canberra). The project was successful in providing the fundamental knowledge and understanding to underpin sustainable harvests of *C. rugosa* eggs and adults in the Maningrida region.

Indigenous communities in northern tropical Australia have used northern snake-necked turtles (*Chelodina rugosa*) as a significant source of food for generation upon generation. They have developed a wealth of knowledge of *C. rugosa* and how they can be sustainably utilised for subsistence. BAC has been keen to see this knowledge put to use in developing a local industry which contributes to economic self-sufficiency while at the same time maintaining and reinforcing links to indigenous culture. The harvest and incubation of *C. rugosa* eggs and the sale of hatchlings into the local (NT) pet industry provides such an opportunity.

Compared to other freshwater turtles, *C. rugosa* are fast growing, reach a breeding age quickly and lay multiple clutches of eggs per year. Our research shows that these life-history traits, in conjunction with density limited hatchling recruitment and local harvest practices, are responsible for the continued persistence of *C. rugosa* over the long period of interaction with people in northern tropical Australia.

Although subsistence harvesting in the Maningrida region appears sustainable, people today are finding it harder to locate turtles. This is not because of cultural

changes to meet contemporary circumstances, but rather, because feral pigs deplete turtle populations immediately prior to harvesting. Projective models indicate that predation by pigs will almost certainly lead to the local extinction of *C. rugosa* in most savannah billabongs in the Maningrida region within 50 years time.

On a more positive note, modelling also shows that if a multi-faceted approach to pig management (including fencing of billabongs, periodic culling and restocking with juvenile turtles) is adopted, *C. rugosa* can continue to be harvested without threatening local population persistence. In fact *C. rugosa* could be harvested for commercial purposes if pigs are appropriately managed. This discovery has the potential to transform present approaches to turtle conservation and management.

On ground training has played a critical role in the project. Djelk Rangers and some community members now possess the necessary skills to detect and quantify contemporary threats to turtle abundance, and to harvest and incubate *C. rugosa* eggs and care for subsequent hatchlings. Importantly, the research has provided a management tool to support judgements on appropriate levels of exploitation in support of indigenous harvests.

Over the next couple of years the BAC Djelk Rangers will continue to collaborate with western scientists, to examine the economic, cultural and environmental benefits of several approaches for managing feral pigs and, in turn, conserving *C. rugosa*. We will keep you updated with our progress.



For further information, or publications arising from this work, contact:

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KANTRI LAIF

News for North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Managers

Kimberley... Northern Territory... Gulf of Carpentaria... Cape York... Torres Strait

Contents

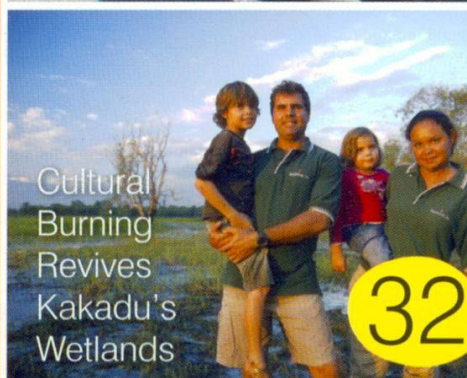
| | |
|---|----|
| Mindil Market Stall Initiative 2008 | 3 |
| New Staff Join NAILSMA | 4 |
| Turtle and Dugong Survey Results | 6 |
| Indigenous Community Water Facilitator Network | 9 |
| Communicating About Water Management in Language | 10 |
| Water Supplies in Remote Indigenous Communities | 11 |
| The Indigenous Water Policy Group | 12 |
| Oceans Apart: United in Action | 16 |
| li-Anthawirriyarra, a-Wurrarumu and li-jawina: Yanyuwa Past, Present and Future | 21 |
| Culture, Campfires and Country. | 22 |
| Integrated Training Delivering Better Results for Indigenous Rangers | 24 |
| United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 7th Session | 26 |
| Satellite Tracking Turtles from Mer Island | 30 |
| Cultural Burning Revives Kakadu's Wetlands | 32 |
| Collaborative research demonstrates that turtle harvesting in the Maningrida region is sustainable | 34 |
| An IPA for the Wellesley Islands? | 35 |
| A Common Vision for Indigenous, Recreational and Commercial Fishers in the Northern Territory | 36 |
| Fighting to save Cape York's Sea Turtles | 38 |
| Graduation Ceremony for Yugul Mangi Rangers | 39 |
| Learn How to Develop a Business Based On Things from the Bush | 40 |
| Managing Water for Australia | 40 |
| Fresh Water in the Maningrida Region's Hybrid Economy | 41 |
| Fencing and Planting at Numuwuy | 42 |
| Working Together for Women's Business | 43 |
| The Sea Country Rangers at Dhimurru | 44 |
| Indigenous Water Values and Interests in the Katherine Region of the Northern Territory | 45 |
| li-Anthawirriyarra West Island Turtle Camp | 46 |
| NAILSMA Delegation Goes to 2020 Summit | 46 |
| 'Healthy Pastures' on Wagiman Country | 47 |
| Catching Western King Brown | 48 |
| What is Indigenous Governance? A Yanyuwa Good News Story from the southwest Gulf | 49 |
| Daly River Aboriginal Reference Group | 50 |
| Arilla Paper Bringing Women Together | 51 |

Issue 4
August 2008



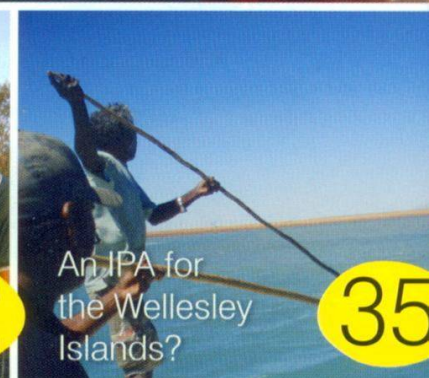
Collaborative research demonstrates that turtle
harvesting in the Maningrida region is sustainable

34



Cultural
Burning
Revives
Kakadu's
Wetlands

32



An IPA for
the Wellesley
Islands?

35