

A group of turtle lovers is dedicated to keeping a close eye on how their creatures of the sea are faring around the North's shores, reports IAN FRAZER

SHY turtles could be excused for pulling their heads in this summer.

One of Townsville's largest-ever team of turtle-watchers is monitoring beaches from Cape Bowling Green to Rollingstone Creek, and around Magnetic Island for tell-tale tracks and nest sites.

But despite the turtle watch organised by the Indo-Pacific Sea Turtle Conservation Group, there is evidence that many boaties are oblivious to Cleveland Bay's vulnerable sea turtles.

Of 140 turtles stranded around the bay since 1996, about 40 per cent had evidence of having been hit by boats, Karen Bolles, co-ordinator of the conservation group said this week.

This boat strike rate was the highest in Queensland, along with Moreton Bay.

"It is likely that less than 20 per cent of the turtles that are struck actually wash ashore, so the number is far higher, but unquantified," she said.

Ms Bolles, a US-trained marine biologist, has recruited Magnetic Island jet-skiers and sea kayakers to watch for turtle tracks on remote beaches.

She approached the operators of Adrenalin Jet Ski and Magnetic Island Sea Kayaks to tell their clients that October to December was the nesting season and to ask them to report sightings of tracks or nests.

"We figure that both groups see benefits from this co-operation," she said. "It's a good addition to their tours — people can go and jet ski and kayak and learn about the sea turtles."

Owner of Adrenalin Jet Skis Peter Smith said on Wednesday he saw turtles in the water "most days" in trips around the island and had found tracks on Five Beach Bay, north of Horseshoe Bay, last month.

Steve Rowland, of Magnetic Island Sea Kayaks, said he, too, saw sea turtles every day between Horseshoe and Radical Bays and that a group of kayakers had found tracks last weekend.

Ms Bolles said the tourists were part of a large monitoring network providing data on the 2001-02 nesting season for the vulnerable green turtles and flatback turtles which usually breed along the North Queensland coastline.

The information will be passed on to State and Federal government departments, the local marine advisory committee, and other interested organisations.

The Indo-Pacific Sea Turtle Conservation Group, formed three years ago by Townsville people concerned about strandings and deaths, won a \$9820 grant for their study in March.

They employed Ms Bolles as project officer about six weeks ago. She has since enlisted help from Reef HQ, Conservation Volunteers Australia, Magnetic Island businesses, school groups, community volunteers and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service.

Ms Bolles, who has worked as a marine educator in the US, says she wants to spread the word that all six species found in Queens-



OVERSEERS ... Indo-Pacific Sea Turtle Conservation Group project manager Karen Bolles and president Ian Bell at a turtle breeding ground

Photo: FIONA HARDING/FH243B02

Making tracks to watch turtles



NEWBORN ... Karen Bolles holds a flatback hatchling

land waters are vulnerable and, in three cases, endangered.

The loggerhead turtle, found mostly at the southern end of the reef, and Olive Ridley turtle, found locally and in the Gulf, and the leatherback, which occasionally nests in northern Queensland, are all regarded as endangered.

She says the nesting report will provide a benchmark for future studies.

"There is not much knowledge of the local nesting population, and no structural monitoring program in the past," she said.

Her team comprises a core of about eight, plus up to 60 volunteers, some of whom have taken part in night patrols of the main beach at Cape Ferguson every Friday and Saturday since early November.

She said they had tagged two nesting turtles, a green and a flatback, at this beach, and that the flatback had returned to lay more eggs two weeks later.

Pallarenda residents had found and were monitoring three flatback nests, one of which hatched last week.

Another small group was watching Bushland Beach.

Helpers from Conservation Volunteers Australia and the Green Corps have been checking Magnetic Island beaches five days a week and also the coastline north-west of Townsville, between Shelly Beach and Rollingstone Creek.

Ms Bolles, who is also a member of the Co-operative Research Centre's effects of line fishing team, has been employed until March as project officer of the turtle group.

The group is seeking more funding to maintain what they hope will be a long term study.

She says nesting activity appears subdued compared with last year, when three batches of eggs were found along The Strand.

Green turtles tend to nest more frequently in Queensland's major rookeries about two years after an El Nino weather phase.

Australia is experiencing a weakening La Nina phase at present.

"A possible explanation may be that during an El Nino phase, more sea grass grows and allows the turtles to put on weight to prepare for breeding," she said.

Ms Bolles says there will still be work for volunteers beyond March, when the last of the nests will have hatched — in cleaning trash from beaches and spreading the word about sea turtles to other community groups.

For example, plastic bags are a threat to turtles when mistakenly eaten in place of jellyfish. Other major threats to sea turtles include boat strike, destruction of

seagrass feeding grounds and being caught in fishing operations.

Ms Bolles said people seemed to be getting the message and taking more care with plastic bags.

"I think the community as a whole is behind sea turtle conservation," she said.

"I've seen an amazing amount of support for the turtle group in Townsville.

"Because they are in a coastal community, people are interested in helping out and getting involved."

On the other hand, many were still unaware that running on a beach at night could stop a turtle nesting, and some boat owners seemed unaware they were sharing the bay with other, vulnerable creatures.

A native of the Massachusetts coast in the US, with fisheries experience in the Gulf of Mexico and Iceland, Ms Bolles said there was more to her mission than saving cute creatures to charm future generations of humans.

"If you think about a food chain, that turtles are food for sharks and that they graze on sea grass you can see they are part of a complex ecosystem," she said.

"If you are decreasing their populations, you upset the balance."

The turtle conservation group's next public meeting will be held on Wednesday, January 16, 7pm, at the headquarters of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, conference room one.

Ms Bolles can be contacted at 4781 5019 or by e-mail at Karen.Bolles@jcu.edu.au.

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