



TURTLE DIARY

A conservation program on Cape York reminds volunteers of their place in world, reflects **Jeanne Eve**

ON the northern banks of Janie Creek, on the Cape York Peninsula, 200km from the northern tip of Australia, sheltered Camp Chivaree is nestled safely behind a waist-high, metal fence with biting green ants guarding its top rail and signs with croc motifs insisting gates must be kept shut.

Inside this compound are several two-person tented cabins, dining shed and kitchen with mosquito-netted windows open to sea breezes, enclosed bush toilets and spacious showers with suspended canvas buckets. A generator supplies power for hot water and lighting, and casuarinas provide ample shade.

This is my home for five nights while I volunteer on the Camp Chivaree turtle conservation program. The nearest habitation is Mapoon, a 30-minute ride away by four-wheel-drive vehicle along beaches. No mobile phones here, just the sounds of nature and a few people.

Mapoon is a remote Aboriginal community almost 90km north of Weipa. The Camp Chivaree turtle conservation program began in 2005 after research demonstrated nesting turtles were under threat from feral animals and ghost net entrapments. Today the program brings together Mapoon councillors, elders, rangers, scientists, government funding bodies and eco-tourists.

This region of Australia has not always been as peaceful. In the past there was conflict over land title for western Cape York. After bauxite was discovered, the Batavia River Mission was closed in 1963 and traditional owners were moved to New Mapoon, near Bamaga on the tip of the Cape York Peninsula.

However, there were a few locals who lobbied for the reopening of their original community and in March 2000 the inaugural Mapoon Aboriginal Council was formed. A year later, the Western Cape Communities Co-Existence Agreement was signed, recognising the equality between traditional owner groups, Cape York Land Council, local shire councils, Comalco and the Queensland government. Mapoon is a Tjungundji word meaning place where people fight on the sand hills, but today there is a strong sense of community among its 300 residents.

From June to October, indigenous rangers Laurie and Cecil conduct turtle patrols with volunteers on Flinders Beach, a 24km stretch from Pennefather River to Janie Creek and accessible only by boat. Using a couple of Land Rovers, we are searching and stopping for nesting flatback turtles or erupting nests on the twice-daily patrols.

My day begins with a morning patrol

looking for erupted nests. Once spotted, the rangers count the baby turtle tracks into the sea; feral dogs have been feasting on every nest site and paw prints circle the rim, scuffing those of the occasional preying goanna or curlew. Then the volunteers carefully scrape out sand with hands down into the egg chamber to recover hatched and unhatched eggs. The typical response from volunteers is that they haven't had as much fun digging in the sand since they were kids.

Sometimes deformed hatchlings are still climbing and these are returned to Camp Chivaree to be euthanised and sexed. The sex of turtles is determined by the temperature of the nest during incubation. Early in the nesting season, which begins in tropical winter, hatchlings tend to be male, but as the sun warms the sand, the majority are female.

Witnessing a nest eruption is unforgettable: turtle eggs hatch after incubating for about 45 days in a scooped-out nest chamber more than 50cm below the surface. It can take up to five days scabbling through aerated sand before the hatchlings emerge into air and patter down to the sea. This walk will be their last on land until they return for nesting.

In an ideal world, the life span of a flatback turtle is about 70 years, but today they are listed as vulnerable and data-deficient. Even with turtle conservation programs, if hatchlings escape, the 70 per cent predation rate of nests by feral animals and natural predators means they have a one in 1000 chance of surviving to sexual maturity.

There's nothing like an encounter with turtle hatchlings and a large saltwater crocodile for a reality check. It is midnight and our evening turtle patrol is almost over. Standing in the back of the vehicle with some of my fellow eco-volunteers, I hear the two-way radio in the driver's cabin crackling, asking if we are on our way back to camp. "Take care, there's a croc near the landing site," warns our camp cook. "I'll put the kettle on."

We continue our slow drive along Flinders Beach searching for new turtle tracks, ready to jump down and locate a new nest, record its global positioning system location, then measure and tag the nesting turtle before it returns to the sea. Headlights shine on scavenging ghost crabs before they scurry back into the calm Arafura Sea. Meanwhile, darkness covers the hideous line of tangled nets, plastic bottles, thongs, light bulbs and gas canisters along the high tide mark; this debris has drifted across the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Tonight the Milky Way shimmers after a



Egged on: A flatback mum hard at work



Shell-shocked: Keepers offer a hand

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA



scorching day and glorious sunset. The patrol finishes when we reach Janie Creek and the vehicles are parked next to fuel cans, stakes and anti-feral animal devices. Ahead our dinghy bobs on its mooring in black water. It holds only six people, necessitating several trips back to camp. My group of nine paid-up volunteers has swelled with four extra Queensland government officials who have joined us for hands-on experience before deciding future funding.

Clambering down with only torches or head lamps for illumination, we discuss who wants to return to Camp Chivaree in the first crossing. I offer to remain behind while the others putter back to camp for tea and bed. It is dark and quiet and I am weary, not from physical exertion but the experience of observing the intense harshness of life and death on this ancient coastline. Jabirus, egrets, terns, pelicans, oystercatchers, sea eagles and brolgas are asleep and, although it appears peaceful, my angst is rising.

I know feral dogs are hiding, watching from the heath. There are no feral pigs, as a recent shoot has culled more than 800, but there is at least one saltwater croc nearby. Laurie has told us he has seen a monster basking at a popular fishing spot near the camp. It is not exactly a Steve Irwin-style crikey moment but, while waiting, I realise my feeble torchlight barely identifies white seashells around my feet, let alone a pair of eyes or hungry jaws.

A splash causes me to helplessly swing my thin light beam over the water. Most likely it's a barramundi, but my mind is unravelling. In those few minutes, waiting for the friendly drone of the outboard motor, I realise my position in the natural food chain on this wondrous and ecologically rich peninsula. Female turtle hatchlings, no bigger than a child's palm, reveal life's powerful force and a lurking saltie has stripped me of city slickness. Camp Chivaree's magic is working and I acknowledge the spirit of the land.

Checklist

Chivaree Turtle Conservation Camp offers two, three or five-day stays from June to October. As well as morning and night turtle patrols, the longer stay offers opportunities to source bush tucker and visit the deserted Batavia River Mission. If an Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service officer calls in, guests learn about illegal shark boats, ghost nets and other nasties. QantasLink flies daily from Cairns to Weipa on the northwest coast of the Cape York Peninsula; guests are transferred to Camp Chivaree, an hour south of Mapoon.

www.capeyorkturtlerescue.com