



Slowly does it for the nest best thing

Fleur Bainger pulls an all-nighter in the name of nature, making like a rock as a 100-kilogram turtle digs its nest beside her.

I'm in a bit of a pickle. An endangered sea turtle roughly twice my weight is busily turfing sand over my motionless body, and it looks as though she might be inclined to lug herself my way. Little more than a shadow in the dark, she raises her basketball-like head and sniffs the air, shifting the weight of her hefty carapace in my direction. Crouching only a metre away, I'm under strict instructions not to stir, so as not to disturb the nesting giant. Thus, being crushed, slowly and decisively, seems imminent.

"Just stay really still, she's coming right at us. Don't move, and she won't realise," is the optimistic advice whispered by my fellow sand-dune commando-crawler. Thankfully, Fiona Morgan, one of the scientific volunteers who monitors the annual sea turtle nesting within Western Australia's World Heritage-listed Ningaloo Marine Park, turns out to be spot on. Mother turtle stops, then returns to dragging her front flippers through the grainy sand, snow angel-style, clearing the way for the nest she'll spend the next few hours working on.

Our new friend is one of hundreds of sea turtles who visit the 260-kilometre stretch of WA, 10 hours drive north of Perth between Carnarvon and Exmouth each year, collectively laying thousands of brilliantly white eggs that resemble ping-pong balls. Three of the world's most endangered species, the loggerhead, green and hawksbill turtles, make the

slow pilgrimage up these remote beaches from late November to early March. The one I'm eyeballing is a loggerhead, identified by her big noggin. Her species only start to reproduce when they hit 30, so it'll be another 30 years before her offspring come back to dig their own nests. Sadly, the success rate is dismal: only about one in 10,000 hatchlings survive.

Morgan and I are cuddling up to the sand at Gnaraloo Station, a century-old working pastoral property-cum-tourism venture whose boundaries cover part of the third-largest loggerhead rookery on the planet.

The ecologically-minded station owner, Paul Richardson, decided to fund a turtle monitoring program some years back, supporting visiting scientists and volunteers as they filled in spreadsheets with GPS coordinates. Since then, the dawn and dusk beach patrols tracking turtle activity have been opened up to

station guests. Long known as a windsurfing, kitesurfing and surfing mecca, Gnaraloo boasts a large, popular camping ground and a small village of self-contained cottages that Richardson, a former builder from Ireland, constructed himself.

With the windswept country's ochre soils, contrasting pale beaches and marine-life-jammed ocean, it's an eye-popping destination for those who brave the corrugated dirt road to get there. And the biggest sweetener? Anyone in residence can join the Gnaraloo Turtle Conservation Program's efforts, free.



In truth a contribution has already been made on each guest's behalf. A portion of Gnaraloo's accommodation fees is invested into the turtle program as well as the Gnaraloo Feral Animal Control Program, to help protect the sea turtle eggs and hatchlings from foxes. Approved by Western Australia's Department of Environment and Conservation, it's a worthy cause that, Richardson hopes, will lead to greater preservation of the rare turtle species.

It's so worthy, in fact, that after a thorough briefing from the boffins, I've decided to pull an all-nighter in the hope of glimpsing the miracle moment, when turtles return to where they were born to continue the cycle of life.

We set out about 9.30pm, walking barefoot along the beach with headlamps until we discover that the swarms of fist-size ghost crabs scuttling over our feet with unnervingly pointy claws will miraculously clear the way if we switch the lights off. Squealing at

directionally challenged crabs is not allowed, I discover, lest we disturb the turtles. Disturbance, team leader Kimmie Riskas says, is a serious matter given each turtle only comes in to nest every few years. "The loggerheads nest in cycles of three to four years. When they come, they'll lay between four to six nests at 10- to 14-day intervals, so if you scare her off she may come back the next night, or it may take longer," she says. "They're very sensitive to movement and disturbance, especially before they've nested. While they're nesting they're pretty intent on what they're doing, but we don't want to startle them and make them retreat back to the water before they get a chance to lay

their eggs."

As we walk in the soft sand, we're on the lookout for turtle tracks that look as though a single tractor tyre has ploughed up towards the dunes.

If there's only one, it means a turtle is up there, whereas two mean she's laid her eggs and returned to the ocean.

As luck would have it, we spot several singular tracks over the next few hours, which is how Morgan and I end up on all fours, crawling slowly up a dune to witness a huge turtle dig her nest at 2am.

Watching her sand preparation routine is quite extraordinary. Out of water, the normally quick and nimble marine being is slow and cumbersome as she digs what's called "the body pit", a large hole which acts to lower her down in the sand. Then, her rear flippers get to work, carving out an egg chamber, where, after a series of heaving breaths, she starts to lay her eggs.

Morgan remembers the first time she witnessed a nesting. "It was a feeling and a rush I've never had before," she says. "In the middle of the night, [I was] laying on a pristine

beach, watching shooting stars and having a turtle throw sand over me; I don't think many people can say they've done that." Happily, I can.

And as I watch mother turtle drag herself back to the lapping water, the sky glowing purple in the dawn, I hope this undeveloped region stays that way so her babies can return.

Trip notes

Getting there

Gnaraloo Station is 150 kilometres north of Carnarvon, on sealed and unsealed roads – check first if conditions mean a four-wheel-drive is required for the sandy stretches.

Skippers Aviation (skippers.com.au)

services Carnarvon from Perth. Alternatively, fly to Exmouth (Learmonth) with Qantas (qantas.com.au), Virgin (virginaustralia.com) or Skywest (skywest.com.au) and drive about 5½ hours south.

Staying there

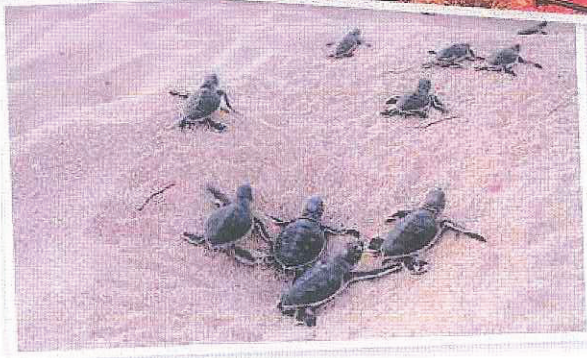
Anyone staying at Gnaraloo Station can participate in the Gnaraloo Turtle Conservation Program, which allows visitors to join in its scientific data collection work until late February. Turtle sightings are not guaranteed and all involvement has a strong conservation and preservation focus with zero disturbance.

Accommodation ranges from tent sites to self-contained cottages.

+61 8 9315 4809, gnaraloo.com.

They're very sensitive to movement.





Circle of life ... clockwise from
main, a mother turtle after nesting;
Gnaraloo Station; Gnaraloo Bay;
turtle hatchlings; ghost crabs.
Photos: Fleur Bainger

