



Australian Government

Department of Defence

Quail Island Air Weapons Range Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Hazard Reduction Project, Stage Two

Newsletter No. 7
Monday 18 June 2012

WELCOME

Welcome to the seventh newsletter for the Quail Island Air Weapons Range Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Hazard Reduction Project. The second stage of the project is well and truly underway with plenty of activity taking place on the islands.

In this edition we will hear from Project Manager, David Thomas, and provide you with an update on the activity that has taken place so far. We will also outline the results of the Media Day that was held on Bare Sand Island on 6 June. Dr Michael Guinea, the Head of the Charles Darwin University Bare Sand Island Sea Turtle Research Program has provided us with some wonderful insights into turtle life on the islands which we look forward to sharing with you.



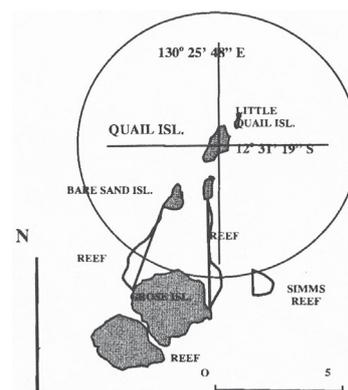
MESSAGE FROM THE PROJECT MANAGER

Another dry season (albeit, like last year, a late start) is upon us and I'm pleased to report that unexploded ordnance hazard reduction operations have resumed in earnest on the former air weapons range at Quail and Bare Sand Islands.

This season, Bare Sand Island has been given priority for deep digital search, with operations transferring to Quail Island later in the year.

The Defence contractor, G-tek Australia Pty Limited, is confident that all objectives set for this dry season will be met. As a result, Defence is also confident that all the major tasks of the operation will be completed this year. However, there will be a number of minor tasks still to be undertaken in 2013.

There are some concerns that members of the public may be accessing Quail or Bare Sand Islands without permission. I would gently remind such people that a Defence Practice Area has been proclaimed to allow this operation to take place and this has been regularly advertised. Unauthorised entry to the area is prohibited and legal action may be taken against trespassers. I do not want to have to take such action, so I would earnestly request that anyone who has a need to enter the proclaimed area to seek permission first. I look forward to working closely with interested parties to ensure mutually acceptable, but above all else, safe outcomes.



Anyone wishing to visit the exclusion zone needs to contact either:

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PROJECT UPDATE

The deep imaging (total magnetic imaging) data collection survey on Bare Sand Island has been completed. Investigation of sub-surface anomalies has commenced, but at the time we go to press no items of unexploded ordnance have been found. Digital imaging equipment was set up on an ATV/Trailer and was towed around the majority of Bare Sand Island to collect survey data. Areas on the island that are not accessible by ATV/Trailer were searched using the same digital imaging equipment in a hand carried mode.

As part of the surface and shallow search of Quail and Bare Sand Islands, field workers from G-tek Australia Pty Limited stockpiled considerable amounts of waste material from the former air weapons range. This material comprised range debris, such as old targets and free from explosive waste, including bomb fragmentation, practice bombs and gunnery projectiles. In May, the last of the material recovered last year, totalling 47.5 tonnes was removed from Quail Island for recycling.

The removal of the scrap material from the island has been quite a complicated operation. A barge carrying a heavy front end loader could only gain access to the island on high tide and two high tides in daylight were required in order for the barge to depart once loaded. Such tidal cycles occur infrequently and it has taken approximately six months to finally remove all the waste material.

This part of the hazard reduction operation will go a long way to not only making the islands safe for future use, but is an invaluable component of maintaining their environmental integrity.





MEDIA VISIT TO THE ISLAND

Significant interest about the project from media in the Northern Territory and nationally lead to the hosting of a media visit to Bare Sand Island. On Wednesday 6 June, members of the project team and Defence personnel accompanied nine journalists to the island.

The trip was successful with comprehensive media coverage around the hazard reduction project. There was an article published in the NT News and television and radio coverage on ABC News 24, ABC News Darwin, Channel 9 Darwin and NITC News, Sydney. The NT News article also led to the project gaining international attention with an article published on myfoxdc.com, an online news website based in Washington DC, USA.



SEA TURTLES, BOMBS AND BIRDS ON BARE SAND ISLAND

An excerpt from an article written by Dr Michael Guinea, Head of the Charles Darwin University Bare Sand Island Sea Turtle Research Program -

Sea turtle conservation and bombing ranges seem an unlikely combination. Each dry season sea turtle researchers, students and nature enthusiasts congregate on Bare Sand Island, a desolate sand cay 50 km west of Darwin. They come from many places: Denmark, Ireland, Germany, Norway, Brazil, New Zealand, Canada, USA and from all states of Australia. Many are university students trying to gain field experience. Others are shopkeepers, homemakers, house painters, bus drivers, school teachers, back packers and many other professions. All wish to gain experiences with sea turtles in the wild. Each night on the high tide, Flatback sea turtles emerge from the waves to lay their eggs in the warm sands of the dunes. As many as 30 sea turtles come ashore in a night on the spring tides. Some nest even during the daytime high tides. The nesting sea turtles are individually tagged and their size recorded along with their nest position and time. Since 1987 nearly 2000 nesting turtles have been tagged on the island. Some are regulars, nesting every year or two. Others we see for only one season.

Our first trips to Bare Sand Island in the 1980s alerted us that the area was once used as a bombing range. Signs on nearby Quail Island warned of unexploded bombs and prohibited entry. Bare Sand Island appeared scarred but its wildlife unharmed by the bombing. It was the presence of nesting and hatchling sea turtle tracks that stimulated the current research into the nesting biology of Flatback sea turtles.

Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) had been unearthed by wind and tide over the years. Each piece was removed appropriately by the RAAF. In 2011 the hazards posed by UXOs were reduced by scanning the island with metal detectors and items marked for later removal. The dry season provided the best time for UXO clearance but this coincided with sea turtle nesting. The challenge was for removal of UXOs without impacting on the nesting turtles or their eggs. Years of research revealed most of the turtle nests were laid on the western beach. Most UXO was in the middle and eastern beach. A window between the weather and the turtle breeding cycle opened in November. Nesting turtles at this time had finished and along with the hatchlings had returned to the open seas and before the wet season build-up with its thunderstorms and electrical interference. The UXO was detonated with the blasts directed upwards.

As with other UXO items that had been detonated over the years, there was no detectable impact on the sea turtles, their eggs or hatchlings.

This year looks like being a bumper nesting season. The first Flatbacks nested this year in March with hatchlings crossing the beach in April. In mid-June the sea turtle researchers will arrive from all parts of the world again. This year three groups of secondary school students are assisting in the data collection. They are joined by university students of veterinary and environmental sciences and enthusiastic turtle researchers who for some are returning for their seventh season.

Duwan (Quail Island) along with neighbouring islands Ngulbiltjik (Bare Sand Island) and Djedjelbitj are sacred sites of the Larrakia people. It is with their permission, Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority Permit, authorisation by the Defence Department, Scientific permits issued by NRETAS and Animal Experimentation Ethics Permits from Charles Darwin University that this research on Bare Sand Island has been allowed to continue. The not-for-profit community group, AusTurtle Inc. supports the research on Bare Sand Island. Details are on their website (<http://www.austurtle.org.au/>)

Michael Guinea

PHOTO: Betty Franklin (think N ink 2011)



CONTACT THE PROJECT TEAM

If you have any questions regarding the project or would like to speak to someone regarding permission to enter the exclusion zone please contact David Thomas:

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If you have any information you would like to put forward for our next newsletter or if there is any part of the project you would like to read more about, please send your contributions or queries through to Sophie Morrison on:

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