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Torres Strait waters support largest Dugong population in the world

A James Cook University (JCU) researcher has described the area between the Torres Strait islands of Badu and Boigu as the true dugong capital of the world.

Internationally recognised expert, Professor Helene Marsh, said the area was a remarkable hotspot for dugongs.

“This area is like nothing I have ever seen before.

“It is very special and truly deserves the dugong capital of the world title,” Professor Marsh said.

“We have conducted aerial surveys of dugongs for 15 years and despite ongoing traditional hunting we have not detected any decline in dugong numbers.”

The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) Chairperson, Toshie Kris, welcomed the survey results.

“We have for years now been supporting and encouraging communities through community based management plans to sustainability manage their own resources including dugong.

“We now have 15 plans in place supported by western science and education and the survey results clearly indicate we are making valuable progress in marine resource management.

“The TSRA is proud to support this fantastic initiative by the communities and is continuing its support through the employment and training of the TSRA Land and Sea Rangers to implement the management plans,” Mr Kris said.

Professor Marsh was speaking at a joint workshop funded by the National Environmental Research Program’s (NERP) Tropical Ecosystems Hub.

Forty delegates attended the workshop to discuss the Torres Strait turtle and dugong populations and identify research priorities for the next three years.

Delegates included researchers, state and federal government agencies, the TSRA Land and Sea Management Unit staff including Land and Sea Rangers and Traditional Owners from Torres Strait Islands and neighbouring mainland Indigenous communities.

Researchers from JCU, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and Queensland Government presented their research to date on seagrass, turtles and dugong in the Torres Strait.

Highlights of recent research conducted in Torres Strait included the discovery of the largest seagrass meadow in Australia in the Dugong Sanctuary area and a model that predicts the impacts of climate change on turtle populations..

International delegates representing United Nations Environment Program and the Papua New Guinea Department of Environment and Conservation also attended to identify research and knowledge linkages with PNG treaty villages.

The TSRA Rangers presented their Community Turtle and Dugong Management Plans.

Rangers will be closely involved in monitoring community turtle and dugong catch enabling them to assess the effectiveness of the Management Plans.



Caption: Professor Helene Marsh and Mabuiag Island Ranger, Terrence Whap, discuss management plans at the joint dugong and turtle research workshop.