

Flatback turtle monitoring program - Thevenard Island -

Volunteer information booklet

2025



Department of **Biodiversity,
Conservation and Attractions**



**Marine Turtles
Western Australia**

North West Shelf Flatback Turtle
Conservation Program

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Cover image: Flatback turtle on the beach at Thevenard Island, Clodagh Guildea/DBCA.

A. Volunteer checklist

- ☐ Read this booklet in full.
- ☐ Confirm your interest and date availability by email to Eleanor Wise at turtles@dbca.wa.gov.au.
- ☐ Receive approval of your application and exact field dates.
- ☐ Complete the volunteer and medical forms, attend a medical check with your GP (at your own expense) and send both sets of forms back to turtles@dbca.wa.gov.au.
- ☐ Send copies of insurance coverage if you are a non-resident or citizen of Australia.
- ☐ Read the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) *Code of Conduct* and *Volunteer health and safety induction* at [Volunteering with the Parks and Wildlife Service | Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions](#) (download the PDF).
- ☐ Attend the “North West Shelf Flatback Turtle Conservation Program Volunteer Training Day” on **21 October 2025** at DBCA Kensington.
- ☐ Familiarise yourself with the ‘Turtle Watching Code of Conduct’ (see page 18).
- ☐ Pack your bags, checking you have everything from the list in Section E (see page 14).
- ☐ Get excited about this amazing field experience!



B. About the monitoring program

Background

The *North West Shelf Flatback Turtle Conservation Program (NWSFTCP)* is a 30 year long conservation program established in 2009 that operates out of the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA).

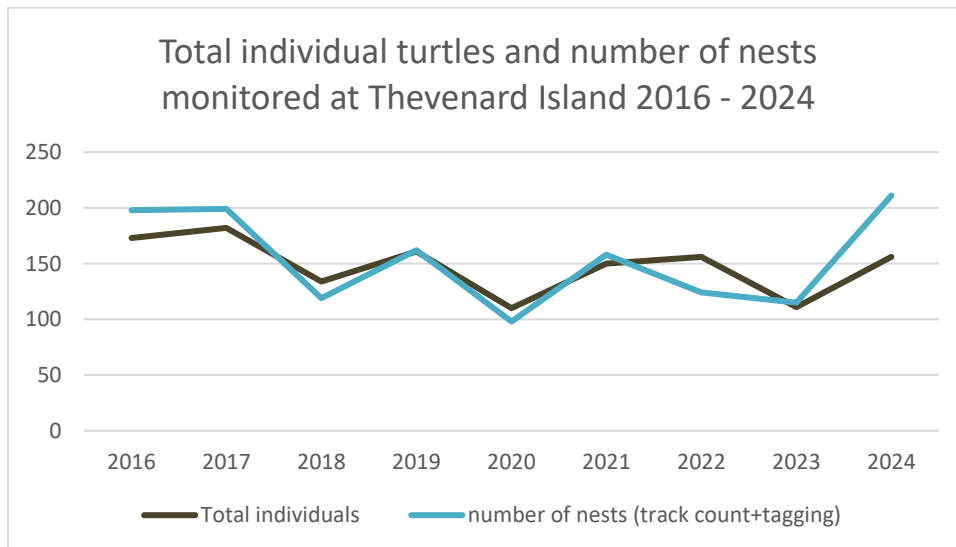
In November/December 2016 and January 2017 a team of scientists and volunteers undertook a pilot monitoring program on Thevenard Island to establish if the turtle rookery was a suitable long-term monitoring site for the program. This pilot was successful, with scientists estimating that at least 200 flatback turtles used the island during the season. Since then, Thevenard Island has been monitored annually, with volunteers assisting NWSFTCP staff to monitor flatbacks over five weeks during peak nesting in November and December.

The scientific and management objectives of this program are to assess the size of the flatback turtle population nesting on Thevenard Island (by counting tracks and tagging females in a capture-mark-recapture study) and evaluate hatching success and hatchling emergence by excavating nests during nesting and in February the following year. Collected data contributes to a broader understanding of the ecology and demography of the Pilbara flatback turtle stock.

Summary of the 2024/25 season:

- 316 flatback turtles were seen over the season (some individuals multiple times).
- 156 individual flatback turtles were identified by flipper and PIT tags.
- 28% of the flatback turtles were “new”, recorded on Thevenard Island for the first time.
- Some individuals returned to the beach up to seven times during the season.
- There were 211 nests recorded in the tagging area.

Longitudinal population monitoring on Thevenard Island:



Dates

The monitoring program runs for five weeks from mid-November to mid-December each year. Volunteers are expected to stay on the island for a minimum of 7 nights, with weekly transfers to/from the island each FRIDAY. The first “week” will be 10 nights, beginning on Tuesday 18 November 2025.

Cost

DBCA pays for the following costs:

- Food and accommodation in cabins on Thevenard Island.
- Return transport from/to Perth to Onslow or Exmouth by commercial plane (location is dependent on island transfers) immediately prior to and after the trip to Thevenard Island.
- Return transport from/to Onslow or Exmouth to Thevenard.

DBCA does not cover the following costs:

- Food and accommodation in Perth/Onslow/Exmouth prior to and after the trip to Thevenard Island.
- Transport to/from the airport in Perth.
- Equipment such as red-light head torch, appropriate closed shoes, long sleeve shirt and pants.
- Personal insurance.

Note: Volunteers who are Australian residents/citizens are covered by DBCA’s insurance policy (see details below). International volunteers must have their own personal travel and health insurance. Some activities such as snorkelling and diving during the volunteer’s free time are not covered by DBCA’s volunteer insurance policy, so volunteers may want to contract their own insurance to be covered for these activities.

- Medical check by the GP.
- Personal expenses.



Summary of research activities

The flatback turtle (*Natator depressus*) is the most common turtle nesting on Thevenard Island. Green (*Chelonia mydas*) and hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) turtles also nest on the island.

Turtle research is conducted with DBCA Animal Ethics Committee approval under a Wildlife Conservation Act 1950 Regulation 17 'Licence to Take Fauna for Scientific Purposes'.

As volunteers you will help with research on flatback turtles. Duties you may assist with include:

- Patrolling the beach at night for nesting turtles
- Tagging turtles with flipper and PIT tags
- Measuring the carapace length of turtles
- Taking skin biopsy
- Excavating nests for eggs
- Patrolling the beach and counting tracks during the day
- Deploying temperature loggers
- Data entry



Flatback turtle



Green turtle



Hawksbill turtle

Volunteer requirements and fitness expectations:

- Capable of patrolling the beach at night for up to five/six hours carrying a 6kg backpack
- Capable of walking on uneven terrain (rocks, soft sand) and up slopes
- Capable of walking 6 – 12km in hot daytime conditions
- Able to sleep during the day
- Capable of lifting 15kg
- Good eyesight for night patrols conducted with special artificial lighting (red lights only)
- Being fit for work at all times while on duty and acting in accordance with the DBCA's Code of Conduct.

If you have any concerns about these requirements or any health conditions that may adversely affect your capacity to perform these duties, please discuss this with DBCA staff BEFORE applying for the program or commencing duties. It is essential that your health conditions are considered before signing up to the program. All volunteers will need to make an appointment with their GP to get their medical fitness for work assessment signed.

C. Thevenard Island

Location

Thevenard Island is located approximately 22km off the coast from Onslow in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. The island is the largest of a group of ten islands called the Mackerel Islands. The Mackerel Islands are 1400km north of Perth.



The turtle tagging program will be based on the southern side of Thevenard Island (see map). The aerial photo shows the western side of the main flatback nesting beach, directly in front of the accommodation.

Environment

Thevenard Island is a “Class C” Nature Reserve. The island is approximately 6km in length and occupies a total area of 550 hectares. Chevron oil and gas facilities, on and offshore of Thevenard Island, were decommissioned late 2015 and the areas have now been revegetated on the island.

Limestone reefs and platforms surround the island, with diverse coral assemblages on the northern side. Areas of deep sandy soil are found on the island supporting Acacia and Triodia shrubland and coastal heath scrub.

Species on/around the island:

- Turtles; green and flatback (nesting November to February)
- Humpback whales (June to October)
- Dugongs (September to April)
- Dolphins including common, bottlenose, spinner and humpback (all year)
- Raptors; osprey, Nankeen kestrels, white bellied sea eagles, white Brahminy kites, black shouldered kites, goshawks
- Terns and other migratory shorebirds
- Short-tailed mouse (Endangered and endemic to Thevenard Island, with 2000 individuals left)
- Ta-ta dragons
- Saltwater crocodiles (rarely seen in the Pilbara, but remain a possibility)



Getting there

Volunteers take flights from Perth to either Onslow or Exmouth. They then board a single-engine aircraft in groups of three for a maximum 45-minute flight to Thevenard Island, which has an airstrip.

Accommodation and amenities

Thevenard and Direction Islands are the only two Mackerel islands with accommodation. Staff and volunteers will stay in fully self-contained cabins on Thevenard Island.

Cabins have two to five bedrooms, with two single beds in each bedroom, so staff and volunteers will be expected to share. Cabins are comfortable with air conditioning and fully contained kitchen facilities. All cabins have their own private bathrooms. Each cabin also has its own ocean front shaded entertaining area, complete with BBQ and outdoor setting. The cabins are spaced along the beach front overlooking the mooring bay and the island jetty. Washing machines (coin operated) and clothes lines are available.



D. Daily life

Turtle work

Turtle work mainly occurs at night; however, some turtles will nest on a high tide during the daytime. We also conduct morning walks to count missed turtle tracks starting at dawn.

We will need to be flexible as shifts will vary due to tides, the number of turtles on the beach and the number of staff/volunteers available. Be aware that some nights may be quiet, and other nights may be extremely busy. Pace yourself as you may get very tired and take time to sleep during the day.

Example: High Tide at 0100 – We would start our patrol of the beach from around 2100 and return to the cabins when turtles stop nesting for the night (potentially two or three hours after high tide). One or two volunteers would conduct the morning track count walk at sunrise to survey the beach for missed tracks and nests. These volunteers would go to bed earlier in the night to reduce fatigue.



Tagging turtles is **physically demanding** and you should expect long hours working under difficult conditions (approximately 5 – 8 hours per night). You will be asked to monitor sections of beach varying from 500m to 6km. This will require you to walk over uneven ground and sandy beaches for up to 10km a night while carrying a 5 – 7kg backpack and occasionally walking up/down steep slopes. Volunteers will need a reasonable level of fitness to walk these distances. If you have any concerns about this, please discuss this with DBCA staff **before applying for the program** or commencing duties.

For some it is also quite mentally and/or emotionally demanding. For safety and comfort, you will always tag with at least one other person. DBCA staff and volunteers with little/no turtle tagging experience will be trained by experienced DBCA staff and be expected to attend a training day before departing. When on the island, check in with your DBCA Team Leader if you are feeling uneasy or unwell. All staff are Senior First Aid trained and equipped with the skills and processes to help you.



Data Entry

Data from each night of turtle tagging will be entered into a database the following day using a laptop computer. Volunteers will assist with data entry as it provides participants with a better understanding of the program.

Other volunteer responsibilities

The tagging program works best when everyone 'pitches in' and helps. Volunteers are expected to help set up and maintain the office space, to help with organising food and menu items, washing dishes and keeping cabins clean and tidy, and to help pack away at the end of the monitoring season.

At the end of each swing, volunteers will remove all used bedding and towels for washing and replace these for the next round of volunteers before departure.

The responsibility of preparing and cooking dinner is shared by DBCA staff and volunteers, who are all expected to contribute. Breakfast and lunch preparation are do-it-yourself at a time that suits you.

Food

All food (standard meals and snacks) and non-alcoholic drinks will be provided by DBCA. There will be plenty of food with different dinner plans each day, but you are welcome to bring extra/specific snacks.

Specific **food allergies and dietaries** can be catered for, but **early notification must be provided**.

Recreation

Daytime activities can include wildlife watching, swimming in the sea, snorkelling, fishing and walks to look at the island. Please note that no access is allowed to the airstrip. You are encouraged to bring something else low energy to keep you amused i.e. a good book, diary, card games, sketch book etc.

When snorkelling, you must snorkel within your ability and with a buddy. Be mindful that there can be a strong current near the jetty and only strong swimmers should attempt to swim to reefs beyond this distance.

Staff and volunteers participating in out-of-hours (before or after work) in-water activities when on field trips may not be covered by Departmental insurance for injury or evacuation purposes. Many variables are associated with determining the Department's liability and each claim would be treated on its merits prior to injury or evacuation compensation being given to the employee/volunteer. Therefore, all staff/volunteers who wish to engage in any out-of-hours diving or snorkelling during fieldtrips do so at their own personal risk, with potentially no corporate insurance cover.

Tagging turtles is the number one priority of the program, so please don't overexert yourself with daytime activities as we may have many busy and late nights.

Communications

Mobile phone coverage varies depending on which network you are with (Telstra works around the resort but cannot be relied on). Internet can be accessed through Starlink. The resort also has land line communication and you will be provided DBCA staff contact numbers if somebody needs to contact you in an emergency.

Mackerel islands resort number: (08) 9184 6444

E. Safety and wellbeing

Provided Safety Equipment**

- Defibrillator
- A master first aid kit will be located in one of the cabins
- Smaller first aid kits will be available for backpacks
- Satellite Phone
- VHF Radios
- Sunscreen
- Insect repellent

**All DBCA staff are trained in Senior First Aid

Medications

Ensure that you bring any required medications; there will not be an opportunity to resupply.

Alcohol and drugs policy

To ensure a safe work environment where DBCA staff and volunteers are not exposed to hazards and risks associated with the use of alcohol and/or other drugs, a strict policy will apply on the island:

- Employees and volunteers will present to work fit for duty and free of impairment by alcohol and any other form of drug.
- A BAC of 0.00% is required for any employee or volunteer undertaking turtle monitoring for the Department.

Smoking policy

In the field, smoking or vaping is not permitted while patrolling the beach and handling turtles. Smoking will be allowed in designated areas away from the cabins.

Hydration and water availability

Water is produced on the island through a desalination plant. This water is good to drink and will be used by the team but is low in minerals and salts. Hydralyte will be supplied, but bringing a personal stock of hydralyte is recommended. In an unexpected circumstance where this water was not suitable for drinking, water would be brought to the island.

Hydration guidelines in a hot climate are a minimum of three litres per day for men and two litres per day for women. Ensure you bring one or two large water bottles or camelbak for turtle work.

Weather conditions & UV radiation

Weather conditions on Thevenard Island in November/December can be hot, particularly around midday. Average temperatures vary between 20°C and 35°C. Please be sensible and 'slip, slop, slap' during the day with long sleeved shirts, sunscreen, broad-brimmed hats and sunglasses. Whilst the weather is usually warm, nights can be cool and windy and we may experience some rain. Volunteers need to be prepared for a variety of weather.

Cuts, abrasion, sprains, strains

Turtle tagging requires staff and volunteers to monitor sections of beach that may be uneven, rocky or steep, during both daytime and night time. Suitable footwear waterproof, with enclosed toes, ankle support and slip-resistant sole must be worn as you will be walking on soft sand and over rocky areas.

Long pants and long-sleeved shirts are recommended as they help prevent scratches from turtles' nails or from barnacles on turtles' carapaces.

Sleep

It is essential that everyone gets adequate sleep. You should be able to sleep during the daytime and at irregular hours. A quiet environment should be maintained around the sleeping area to allow everyone to rest. Bringing your own sleep mask and earplugs is recommended.

Lifting

There will be many tasks requiring lifting. Each person must recognise their own ability and not go beyond this point. There are many people to help and lifting can always be shared. Please remember to keep a good posture and in particular a straight back when lifting.

Bites and stings

The surrounding reef provides opportunities for amazing snorkelling as there is a large diversity of marine life. Marine animals such as stonefish, jellyfish, cone shells and blue-ringed octopuses can be dangerous and can potentially bite or sting. Do not touch corals as you could end up with stings or coral cuts (poisoning). Other animals to be aware of include sharks and rays.

It is highly recommended that you ensure your tetanus vaccinations are up to date.

Suitable footwear with enclosed toes is highly recommended when going on a hike on the island.

Working with turtles

Training on how to handle turtles will be provided to limit the risks of being injured by turtles:

- Never stand in front of the turtle - flatback turtles can bite if given the opportunity.
- When tagging or measuring keep feet and legs away from the turtle because the claws on the flippers can scratch.
- Be careful not to get sand in your eyes when turtles are digging or covering their nest.

Before leaving the cabins to do any activities, you must:

- tell someone (who is awake!) where you are going and when you expect to return;
- bring a phone that has reception, where possible;
- wear sensible clothing/footwear;
- take sufficient water; and
- record your details (name, destination, time of departure and expected time of return) on the whiteboard in the cabin. Failure to do so will result in cooking and washing up for the rest of the trip!

An emergency 'Lost Participant' plan will be enacted if you do not return at the expected time, with Emergency Services called if you are not located within 90 minutes (during the day) or 60 minutes (at night) of your expected return time.

Please take these safety procedures seriously. If you have any questions or doubt, please ask a DBCA member of staff.

F. Things to bring

Try to keep your main bag around 10kg total weight, plus a small day bag/backpack.

For tagging:

- OLD clothing – long pants and long-sleeved shirts or overalls.
- Head torch – it must have a red light.
- Suitable footwear waterproof, with enclosed toes, ankle support and slip-resistant sole – make sure they are **comfortable** as you will be doing a lot of walking! Shoes/boots with high ankles will help keep sand out. Reef walkers or wetsuit booties are not suitable.
- Gaiters or sock guards may be useful for keeping sand out of your shoes/boots.
- Glasses/contacts (if required) for recording or reading tag numbers.
- Watch/timepiece for recording the time on datasheets.
- Alarm clock (essential to ensure that you wake for your shift).

In general:

- Sun glasses x 2 pairs
- Broad-rimmed sunhat/bucket hat
- Water bottle(s) (at least 2L)
- Casual clothing for ALL conditions (it can **get cold at night**, especially if there's wind – a warm shirt/light jacket and beanie are recommended)
- Water bottle
- Light towel/sarong (beach towels are provided in the cabins)
- Swimming suit and sandals
- Toiletries, medications and personal items
- Sense of humour!

Optional:

- Camera
- Binoculars
- Books/music etc
- Portable charging device for your personal devices
- Eye shades and ear plugs for daytime sleeping
- Any special food you require
- Fishing, swimming and snorkelling gear
- Any small games (e.g. cards) to keep you entertained during the day!



G. Other important information

Volunteer insurance

Volunteers are covered under DBCA's insurance policy for volunteers if they are registered volunteers and if they are Australian residents/citizens.

Volunteers are covered within the scope of the tasks designated and available for a particular project. They are also covered whilst travelling between place of residence and place of voluntary employment but not during any substantial deviation for reasons unconnected with the voluntary employment.

Volunteers who wish to engage in any out-of-hours diving or snorkelling during fieldtrips do so at their own personal risk, with potentially no corporate insurance cover. If you wish to ensure you are covered adequately then you may consider organising personal dive injury and evacuation insurance through an independent provider.

Personal Injury: Benefits are paid on an "out of pocket basis" after other entitlements have been exhausted. That is, volunteers are required to first claim on Medicare, private health cover, personal insurance, employment sick leave entitlements, compulsory third-party insurance etc.... Volunteers are covered up to \$221,891 for personal accident.

Vehicle and property damage: Benefits will be paid on an "out of pocket basis" for damage caused to a volunteer's private motor vehicle or personal property used whilst undertaking authorised Departmental volunteer activities, after other entitlements have been exhausted. That is, volunteers are required to first claim on private insurance before submitting a claim for out-of-pocket expenses to the department. RiskCover may pay excess over \$1000.

Occupational Health and Safety

Safety and health in Western Australian workplaces is regulated by the *Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984* (the OSH Act) and the Occupational Safety and Health Regulations 1996 (the OSH regulations) supported by codes of practice and guidance notes.

Volunteers are protected under Section 21 of the Act where employers must ensure that people who are not their employees (such as volunteers) are not harmed as a result of the work carried out by the employer, employees or other volunteers. Section 23E of the Act also encompasses volunteers and states that employer duty of care requirements are applicable.

Emergency response procedures, evacuation plan and medical incident

Upon arriving at the island, you will review the Risk Assessment, Emergency Response Procedures and Evacuation Plan with your DBCA Team Leader.

Should volunteers be impacted by a medical incident during fieldwork, they must:

- Report injury or illness to the DBCA Team Leader, who may administer First Aid. The Team Leader will report this to the NWSFTCP staff who will record the incident.
- Upon return to the mainland, seek medical attention and obtain a First Medical Certificate from their GP (advise GP this is not 'Workers Compensation').
- Pay for any medical treatment required, otherwise delays may occur possibly resulting in debt collection from the volunteer by medical providers.

- Complete a RiskCover workers' compensation claim form (obtained through DBCA Community Involvement Unit or Risk Management Branch – contact turtles@dbca.wa.gov.au if you need assistance).
- Provide documents and invoices showing out of pocket costs e.g. difference between Medicare payment & GP.
- Wait while Risk Cover reviews information accuracy to determine liability.
- Be reimbursed if claim is approved.

NOTE: Claimant must pay the account first, then claim through their own insurance or Medicare. Insurance does not cover total cost of treatment.

Conflict of interest

A conflict of interest is a situation arising from conflict between the performance of the functions of the Department and private or personal interests. Volunteers should take all reasonable steps to avoid a conflict of interest and be aware of and identify for themselves any conflicts of interest or perceived or potential conflicts of interest. If volunteers have a Conflict of interest, you must disclose them to a member of staff before commencing duties and a form may need to be completed.

General code of conduct

DBCA's staff and volunteers are expected to be open, accountable, responsive, innovative, outcome focused and collaborative and will always act with the highest integrity.

Some important points from DBCA's Code of Conduct are highlighted below:

Staff and volunteers are required to:

- act with integrity in the performance of official duties and to be scrupulous in the use of official information, equipment and facilities.
- exercise proper courtesy, consideration and sensitivity in dealings with members of the public and other employees/volunteers.

In case of a workplace incident (e.g. conflict between students, volunteers and/or staff, complaints regarding workload or work environment, harassment, health and safety issues), you should immediately report to your DBCA Team Leader.

Students and young people participating in community outreach programs

For 1 – 2 weeks each year, students from Onslow School and families with young children from the Waalitj Foundation in Onslow will be present on Thevenard Island. They will be participating in "Turtle Camp", an on-Country conservation experience delivered by the NWSFTCP Science Communication and Education Project Officer and team. You may interact with these groups on the beach during turtle monitoring (they participate in monitoring activities and nest excavations) or daytime activities, under the supervision of DBCA or school/Waalitj staff.

Media

If a journalist contacts you directly, refer them immediately to turtles@dbca.wa.gov.au . Do not provide personal comment, images or video to journalists.

Photography

General information about a photographer's right can be found at: <http://www.artslaw.com.au/info-sheets/info-sheet/street-photographers-rights/>

Volunteers may take photos for personal use whilst on the island. Photos of scenery or of the person taken whilst 'off duty' may be published on social media as long as any caption or comment does not publish information that is not already publicly known. Check with anyone in the photos if they are happy for you to share their image first.

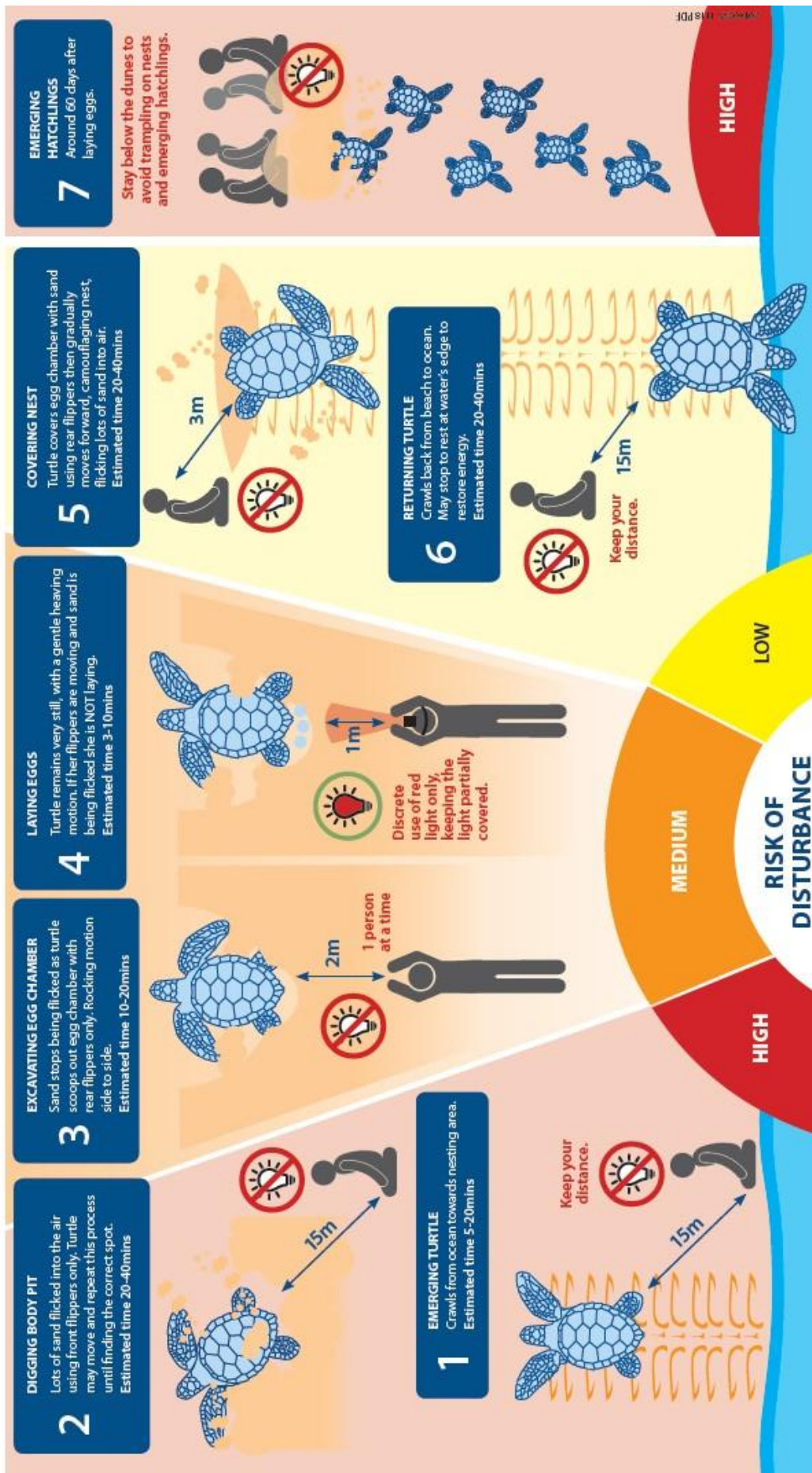
You may take **photos of turtles**; however, you must follow these rules to ensure Animal Ethics licenses and Departmental reputation are not put at risk:

- Do not share photos to any public forum, including social media sites, of the 'work' being conducted, including:
 - turtles being flipper or PIT tagged
 - turtle biopsy
 - nest excavations
- Do not share photos of you or any other person breaching the **Turtle Watching Code of Conduct** (see next page).
- Do not share photos of you without enclosed shoes or appropriate PPE on while turtle monitoring.

Volunteers will be required to complete a "Talent Release Form" for DBCA. This is a consent form for DBCA to take and publish photos or videos of you. If volunteers do not consent or fail to return the form, it will be their responsibility to remind DBCA staff and other volunteers that they do not consent to being captured in images or video products during the field work.



Turtle Watching Code of Conduct



NO GLOW: Nesting turtles and hatchlings are easily disturbed by lights, use the moon to light your way.

MOVE SLOW: To avoid disturbing turtles, walk along the water's edge.

STAY LOW: Out of sight of nesting turtles – sit, crouch or lie in the sand.

LET THEM FLOW: Let hatchlings make their own way to the ocean, they take an imprint of that beach so they can return to the same area when they are ready to mate and lay eggs. Try not to get between hatchlings and the water's edge.