

## Flatback turtles set to lay thousands of eggs on Queensland island but just a handful will survive

By Ellie Sibson

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**About 7,000 flatback turtle eggs are about to be laid at Australia's only privately owned turtle rookery but only seven hatchlings are expected to live to adulthood.**

Researchers on Avoid Island, south-east of Mackay, are tracking the vulnerable species to determine how coastal development is affecting the population.

For the past five years, marine biologist Nancy Fitzsimmons has travelled regularly to the island to study the turtles.

"We tag the turtles, we measure them, we see how many eggs they are laying and then we monitor those nests throughout the season so that then we can look at the hatch success," she said.

"We don't have a lot of long-term data on any of our flatback turtle populations, so this is part of an effort to get a good 10 years of data on them to see how the population is going, if it's a stable population or not.

"One of the projects that we will be doing this year is getting some satellite tags put on the animals so we can see where they are actually going between the times they are laying their eggs.

"Once we see that then we'll be able to see what sort of risks they're exposed to, whether that's from boat strike or fisheries or pollutants or habitat alteration."

### Perfect environment free from predators and feral animals

The not-for-profit group Queensland Trust for Nature (QTFN) bought the 83-hectare island in 2006 and it has been closed to the public ever since.

Spokeswoman Felicity Shapland said the island was an ideal habitat for the flatback turtle.

"Avoid Island is really unique and special because it's one of the only places where it's predator-free and free from human impacts," she said.

"There are no feral animals, no foxes, pigs or dogs that eat the turtle hatchlings and the eggs.

"The light pollution is basically zero, so the hatchlings can make a direct beeline to the sea when they hatch, which keeps their energy reserves up for the next journey ahead of them because it can be quite a difficult journey."

Nesting season begins in November and at this time each year about 70 flatback turtles lay about 7,000 eggs on the island.

The first hatchlings will emerge next month, but it is estimated that one in 1,000 will make it to adulthood.

Researchers and volunteers comb the beaches for rubbish and remove weeds from the dunes so turtles can nest easily.

QTFN general manager Nerida Bradley said she would like to see a permanent research station built on the island.

"To be able to get a permanent facility into a remote location like this takes a lot of work and it's a pretty expensive exercise," she said.

"As development encroaches on the habitat, as climate change impacts on the oceans, it's really important that places like Avoid Island are looked after by organisations like QTFN who really have the conservation of species at the forefront of their minds."

QTFN partners with universities, schools and volunteer organisations for a range of research and education programs.

**Topics:** environment, environmental-impact, environmental-management, environmental-policy, environmental-health, conservation, animals, human-interest, great-barrier-reef, oceans-and-reefs, mackay-4740, qld