

Blanche scales up sea snake study

■ Peter de Kruijff

Living in the Kimberley means the sight of a slithering snake is a common one, but a Queensland university PhD candidate is coming across the country to explore the WA coastline to conduct research on their lesser-known aquatic cousins.

WA is home to 21 of the world's 60 species of true sea snakes, with five of those found nowhere else in the world, including the short-nosed sea snake, the leaf-scaled sea snake and the dusky sea snake, which are critically endangered.

However, there is so little information about the other two — the brown-lined sea snake and the Shark Bay sea snake — and their conservation status cannot be assessed.

This is where Blanche D'Anastasi from James Cook University in Townsville, the recent recipient of a \$7000 marine science grant from the Foundation of National Parks and Wildlife, stepped in.

Ms D'Anastasi discovered her passion for the ocean and marine conservation after studying an advanced marine science program which evolved into an honours research project on one of the most endangered species on the planet — the sawfish.

The researcher said she planned to acquire snake tail scale clippings as genetic samples from Shark Bay all the way up to Broome to determine the distribution of sea snake species along WA.

"My research is focused on using cutting-edge genetic approaches to



Brave Aidan Mitchell rescued this sea snake he found high and dry on the beach near Coconut Well. Mr Mitchell moved the snake back to the water and watched it swim away safely, much to his children's delight. Picture: Aidan Mitchell

was sighted at Ningaloo reef, so it's possible there's coastal populations of these critically endangered species that we don't know about," she said.

Ms D'Anastasi said there were once many sea snakes in WA at places like the Ashmore Reef, off the North West coast of WA, but an extinction-type event occurred there sometime since the 1970s, leaving no trace of the reptiles.

She said scientists were unsure as to how, when or why this occurred, and this was a reflection of what little research was being done on sea snakes.

"There's actually no explicit sea snake management strategy in existence in Australia, so my goal is to use my research to help support Australia's first sea snake conservation strategy, and it'll be focused on coastal WA," she said.

Ms D'Anastasi said her field research would start at the end of the month and continue next year.

"I've been talking to a lot of people ... and they're providing me with an amazing amount of local information about what sea snakes are where," she said.

"The DPaW's staff have been incredible in providing their local knowledge, as have fishermen and dive operators," she said.

Some species of sea snake are the most venomous in Australia and should always be treated with care.

However, Ms D'Anastasi said many were curious animals which had been known to play with their reflection in diver's goggles, as well as get overly friendly with scuba breathing tubes during mating season.

She said there had been exciting sightings in recent years of two of the critically endangered species.

"There was a juvenile (leaf-scaled sea snake) washed up at Barrow Island, and also more recently the short-nosed sea snake

very rare and unique species.

"My job is to use genetics to figure out the geographic distribution of these animals.

"I also want to find out how far they are travelling to breed with called olive sea snakes, when

working out who occurs where, because there's a little bit of confusion," she said.

"Lots of these species get called olive sea snakes, when

they are travelling to breed with