



MEDIA RELEASE



Date: June 3, 2011

Save a shark... with your camera!

To celebrate World Environment Day (5 June) Reef Check Australia (RCA) is pleased to announce an exciting new opportunity for volunteers to “dive in” and help protect their local marine environment! The well-established Reef Check Australia Reef Health Database will, from today, host another exciting community monitoring project called Grey Nurse Shark Watch (GNS Watch).

Multiple project partners have joined forces to launch GNS Watch, including global conservation organisation Fauna & Flora International (FFI), community group Burnett Mary Regional Group (BMRG), Department of Environmental Resource Management (DERM) and The University of Queensland (UQ).

The Australian east coast population of Grey Nurse Shark (GNS) is listed as critically endangered under the Commonwealth Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature’s Red List of Threatened Species. Hunted almost to the point of extinction in the 1950’s, Australia’s east coast GNS population is still only an estimated 1000 individuals. Despite many years of research and management efforts since that time, much is still unknown about this iconic species and urgent research is needed to monitor their recovery and to ensure that key areas are protected for their ongoing survival.

GNS Watch is a community photographic identification monitoring program that encourages divers and fishers to submit their photographs to aid in estimating GNS numbers, movements and distributions. Photographic identification is possible because of the unique spot pattern on each individual shark. Photographs submitted by volunteers will contribute to a national database on the grey nurse shark, which will be made available to stakeholders, researchers and managers. Public access to data will also be facilitated, to allow contributors to see their own sightings, and those of others.



The photographic identification monitoring program will allow grey nurse shark movements and distribution to be monitored over time.

The GNS Watch database will be hosted by Reef Check Australia, which launched its freely-accessible Reef Health Database in 2009. *“The Reef Check Australia Reef Health Database features long-term monitoring data collected by our trained volunteers about what is making up, living on and impacting Queensland reefs. RCA believes that the GNS Watch program will provide another great opportunity for people to take an active role in learning about and protecting our ocean resources. We are thrilled to host this ground-breaking project.”* says Jennifer Loder, General Manager.



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The project and its partners are grateful for the generous financial contribution from Australian Capital Equity.

For more information on GNS Watch or check out the website for yourself, please visit <http://www.reefcheckaustralia.org/grey-nurse-shark-watch.html> about how to get involved and updates on project outcomes.

For media interviews please contact:

Department of Environment and Resource Management Media Services on 07 3224 7792 or email media@derm.qld.gov.au

For additional information and images, contact:

Jennifer Loder, Reef Check Australia via email jenn@reefcheckaustralia.org or phone 0402 284 681

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Grey Nurse Shark Fast Facts

- The GNS's scientific name *Carcharias taurus* comes from the Greek word carcharo, meaning sharp pointed or jagged, referring to their impressive teeth!
- GNS are a large shark that grows to at least 3.2m long. They are grey-bronze dorsally with a paler off-white underbelly with reddish or brownish spots scattered on the body.
- 931 sharks have now been photo-identified in the Australian east coast population.
- GNS are often observed in congregations hovering above rocky outcrops and the sea floor, or in caves or overhangs, they are rarely observed resting on the sea floor stationary.
- Female GNS have two uteri and give birth to live young with a maximum of two pups every 2-3 years. Gestation is 9-12 months. Pups are on average 1m long.
- Fertilised eggs develop into embryos that grow within each uterus. By the time an embryo reaches about 100 mm it has developed teeth and now starts to feed on its siblings (intra-uterine cannibalism). Once all of the other embryos in that uterus have been eaten it feeds on unfertilised eggs released from the ovary (oophagy), until it is born.
- Wolf Rock is the only known gestation site for female GNS on the Australian east coast. Wolf Rock is also the northernmost known aggregation site and is located near Double Island Point (Rainbow Beach) in Queensland.
- GNS are believed to live about 35 years in the wild.



MEDIA RELEASE

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MEDIA RELEASE

Project Partners

Fauna & Flora International (FFI) has a proven track record of successful conservation initiatives and a wealth of experience and expertise in all aspects of conservation including biodiversity conservation, scientific research, and engagement and education activities. FFI will provide technical advice in the delivery of the research program, will assist in the development of the “Shark Watch” program, manage communications and the overall program.

The Burnett Mary Regional Group for Natural Resource Management Ltd. (BMRG) is the coordinating body for natural resource management in the Burnett Mary region. BMRG addresses natural resource and environmental management issues concerning water quality, salinity, coastal and marine management, biodiversity, sustainable production, community engagement and capacity building. BMRG’s relationships with the local community and partner organisations will assist in the development of the Grey Nurse Shark Watch program and will ensure appropriate stakeholders are engaged in the program.

The University of Queensland (UQ) is one of Australia’s premier research and learning institutions. Professor Mike Bennett is an invited member of the IUCN’s Shark Specialist Group (SSG), the key body for assessing the conservation status of elasmobranchs. Professor Bennett co-organised the highly successful Australasia and Oceania SSG workshop, attended by shark experts from around the world and heads the “Queensland Shark and Ray Research Group” based at the University of Queensland. Dr Carley Bansemer (an associate researcher with the Queensland Shark and Ray Research Group) and Professor Bennett have researched the east coast population of grey nurse sharks since 2004 and published many scientific papers and reports on the subject. Professor Bennett and Dr Bansemer will provide expert advice on all aspects of the research associated with this project and supervise a PhD that will incorporate aspects of the current GNS research and community education program.

Reef Check Australia (RCA) is an award-winning marine conservation charity. RCA are part of a global network of trained volunteers who regularly monitor and report on reef health. Reef Check Australia has more than 100 monitoring sites along the coast of Queensland, facilitating collaborative efforts between commercial dive operators, volunteers, NRM agencies and community-based partners to act as an early warning system for changes in reef and ocean health. RCA with assistance from the partnership will establish, integrate and host the “GNS Watch” website within their existing reef health database framework. RCA will also publicise data outcomes and opportunities for participation within their membership network.

