

go... save the turtles on... fitzroy island

For a memorable trip to Far North Queensland, spend the day volunteering at the Turtle Rehabilitation Centre – and don't forget to “shell out” for a donation

We shell overcome! ←



Jennie Gilbert, the co-founder of the Fitzroy Island Turtle Rehabilitation Centre, is tirelessly committed to these beautiful creatures, but says the real heroes are the volunteers. “We don’t receive any government funding and rely on donations, so our day-to-day work is done by volunteers,” she says. “Without them we couldn’t run this centre.” Made up of

work-experience students, military veterans and animal lovers, there are a minimum of four volunteers each day, with a total of around 50 working in rotation.

After catching a ferry to Fitzroy Island, we head straight to the centre and sign in before being briefed by Jennie. We wash our hands before touching the turtles and we’re forbidden to

The Centre's co-founder Jennie Gilbert and volunteers help the turtles



feed Angie, a 95-year-old olive ridley turtle, as she is prone to giving newcomers a nip. Then it is down to business. The Centre has been built on the site of an old prawn farm, and has very basic facilities.

There is a roof, wire fencing for walls, a few large tanks with flat bottoms for the turtles, a sink for cutting up and preparing food, a storage container for an office and a small interpretive centre for tours. It is functional, but it works, and has the highest success rate in Australia for rehabilitating turtles. Jennie explains that this new centre was built to accommodate the enormous increase in sick turtles being brought in to the Cairns facility after the floods in 2010 and Cyclone Yasi in 2011.

Today there are eight turtles in care. I meet Ella, Ava, Squirt, Angie, Woody, Harry, Betty and Barney, who were all at different stages of rehabilitation. We change the filter bags hanging in each tank, then feed the turtles de-spined squid and prawns. I look after Squirt, a 15-year-old green sea turtle »





The turtles are in the Rehabilitation Centre for a range of reasons, including shark attacks and illegal hunting

who has a penchant for squid heads and loves having her back scratched.

Then we clean up the tanks. It's all hands on deck as Barney and Betty are relocated to temporary tanks, and I get some one-on-one time with Betty. I scrub algae off her slimy shell, although she was not as enthusiastic about this as I was.

Rehabilitation for these turtles can last anywhere from six months to three years, and when recovered they are all released back into the ocean. Their main threats are not only predators such as sharks, crocodiles and large barracuda,

but also boat strikes, illegal hunting, loss of nesting grounds and starvation. The deterioration of seagrass beds in the area, one of their main food sources, is also a risk.

Rob Coles, the principal research scientist for the Centre of Tropical Water & Aquatic Ecosystem Research at James Cook University, confirms that seagrass meadows in shallow waters have deteriorated. "Seagrass are flowering plants that need sunshine to grow, and when there is a lot of rain from cyclones and stormy weather there is not a lot of growth," he explains. However, Green Island still has plenty of seagrass, and the improving weather will hopefully see other seagrass meadows grow back.

Seeing and interacting with sea turtles on Fitzroy Island is a highly rewarding experience available to all visitors who make a donation to the Centre.

If you would like to learn more about the work being done, and how to volunteer at the Turtle Rehabilitation Centre or make a donation, contact Jennie Gilbert at saveourseaturtles.com.au ¹



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