MARINE PLANTS OF THE KIMBERLEY

On 4 October 2006, John Huisman spoke to the Kimberley Society about his ongoing taxonomic studies of the marine plants of the Kimberley, these forming part of his wider studies of Western Australian algae. John is a seaweed taxonomist who received his Ph.D from the University of Melbourne but has spent most of his working life (22 years and counting) living and conducting research in Western Australia. He is the author of *Marine Plants of Australia* (UWA Press), a colour guide to some 300 species, with most of these photographed underwater.

John's presentation concentrated on the results of a recent WA Museum survey of the Rowley Shoals, Scott Reef and Seringapatam Reef, the 'shelf-edge reefs' located some 300 km offshore. The north-west of Western Australia is virtually unknown with regard to its marine flora. Prior to the current studies, less than 30 species of marine algae had been recorded from the region. Considering the very rich seaweed floras of, for example Rottnest Island (ca 400 spp.) to the south, and the Philippines (ca 700 spp.) to the north, it is highly likely that the marine flora of north-western Australia will be of a similar order. This is proving to be true, and the results are being compiled into a book describing the marine benthic flora (the 'attached' seaweeds and seagrasses). This will hopefully be completed some time in 2007 and be published in 2008.

The Museum expedition included a team of taxonomists, examining the fish, corals, molluscs and crustaceans, as well as the marine plants. For the majority of the marine fauna, this survey supplemented earlier records and greatly enhanced what is known about the atolls. For the flora, this represented the first opportunity to systematically collect and describe the species. Prior to this survey, only one algal species had been recorded from the reefs, and that was collected during a Russian survey and described in a very obscure publication. The results are still preliminary, but some 150 species have been recognized in the collections.

Included are many species never before recorded from Western Australia. The alga described from the Russian survey (a crustose red alga called *Rhizolamellia*) was also collected and the specimens will allow a reappraisal of the genus. One surprising feature of the reefs was the total absence of the brown seaweed *Sargassum*, a genus that is generally typical of tropical regions. It is not known why the alga might be absent.

John presented a series of photos taken on the trip, many of the marine plants (naturally), but also several of interesting and stunning fish, corals, sea snakes, and sharks. The seaweed flora included a surprisingly diverse array of species, many as colourful and dazzling as the more well-known fish and invertebrates.

The results of the survey (both plants and animals) will be compiled into a special volume, which will be published by the WA Museum in late 2007.