



BOAB BULLETIN

No. 103

April 2011

NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETINGS

commencing 7.15 for 7.30 p.m. at

Shenton Park Community Centre, corner Onslow and Herbert Roads

Wednesday, 6 April 2011

Greg Keighery (Dept of Environment and Conservation)

“Kimberley Islands Bio-Survey”

Wednesday, 4 May 2011

Craig Hutchinson (Indigenous Land Council)

“Indigenous Training Programs in the Kimberley Region”

Wednesday, 1 June 2011

Jiri and Maria Lochman (Wildlife photographers)

“Thirty Years of Kimberley Photography”

Wednesday, 6 July 2011

Kate Trinajstic (University of Western Australia)

“Research on the Kimberley Gogo Fish fossils”

Members and visitors are invited to stay for supper after the meeting.
The Society asks a \$2.00 hospitality fee from non-members.

ARGYLE DIAMONDS ORD VALLEY MUSTER 2011

The Ord Valley Muster, now in its 11th year, runs from 12 to 22 May and will showcase the landscape, cultural diversity and hospitality of the East Kimberley. The Airnorth Kimberley Moon Experience on 14 May will present four main acts: rock legend Jimmy Barnes, songstress Vanessa Amorosi, ARIA award winner Bob Evans, and a collaboration between Pigram Brothers and Alex Lloyd (*Mad Bastards* music). Other events include the Melbourne International Comedy Festival Roadshow, and cooking with celebrity chef Curtis Stone. Kununurra Visitor Centre sells tickets for most events (see www.ordvalleymuster.com.au).

FROM THE PRESIDENT

A brief but distressing article appeared in *The Australian* in late February. Titled "Kimberley Aboriginal suicides blamed on bureaucratic waste", it indicated that nine people aged between 15 and 52 had taken their own lives across the Kimberley region since December 22. This shocking and almost unbelievable statement led me to take a closer look at what has been reported about such matters in recent years. One item was the inquiry, headed by State Coroner Alastair Hope, following five suicides at Oombulgurri community in 2005/06. No one could read this document without being deeply saddened and profoundly affected. One of the outcomes of the enquiry was to impose an alcohol ban at the community in a bid to improve the quality of life and reduce the number of suicides. Since its imposition, and for a variety of other reasons, there has been a progressive exodus of people from the community. By February this year the population had dwindled to 28 with 6 public servants providing support facilities and services. The State government was reported to be giving consideration to converting the community into a tourism or juvenile justice facility. The closure of the community will now almost certainly occur with the report in early March on National Indigenous Radio that the school and community store had closed and the relatively new medical centre was likely to close in the near future. Although various moves were made to improve the situation at the community following the coroner's inquiry, ultimately it is the extremely high cost of maintaining infrastructure and services for a small number of people that is leading to its demise.

The sad and continuing series of statistics and stories regarding sections of the Aboriginal population in the Kimberley is cause for serious reflection and urgent action by the relevant authorities.

Jeffrey J Gresham

Editor's Note: Some of the material mentioned above can be read online. See:

http://aap.newscentre.com.au/acci/110228/library/trade_and_internationals/25138792.html

www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/kimberley-aboriginal-suicides-blamed-on-bureaucratic-waste/story-fn59niix-1226013135939

www.safetyandquality.health.wa.gov.au/docs/mortality_review/inquest_finding/Oombulgurri_Finding.pdf

NEW "KIMBERLEY KID"

At last I have had confirmation of yet another Kimberley player on the AFL list. Zeph Skinner had quite a big article in the *Weekend West Australian*, March 5th and 6th 2011. He is described in the article as the "one that got away". He was a former Claremont Colts player who was due to play against Fremantle at Bunbury, playing for the Western Bulldogs. Originally from Noonkanbah Community, he has been playing in the Northern Territory after playing in the Claremont Colts in 2008. The Coach from Claremont, Simon McPhee, tried to lure him back to Claremont in 2009.

Zeph was described as being a "great kid, a real ripper of a kid but he was still learning about how to work in with the team". Things got better from there. In the game against the Dockers in Bunbury he kicked four goals and was described as being the "Kimberley Kid" so if there are any Bulldogs fans out there I expect them to provide updates for the rest of the year!

Jack Vercoe

WHALES AND THE KIMBERLEY COAST

On 1 December 2010, the Kimberley Society heard from Richard Costin (whale researcher, naturalist, documentary film maker and photographer) and Annabelle Sandes (whale researcher, artist and photographer). For the past five years, this adventurous, dedicated pair have been studying the presence of humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) on the Kimberley coast. Operating as Kimberley Whale Watching, they use high definition video, stills cameras, and hydrophones (underwater microphones) to record the behaviour, songs and individual tail fluke markings of these cetaceans. They also record whale statistics, taking particular note of the percentages of cows and calves.

Flown down from Broome to present their richly illustrated talk in Perth, Richard and Annabelle took time out from finalising work on three documents:

1. 2010 Kimberley Cetacean Survey;
2. Submission to Marine Policy Branch, Department of Environment and Conservation On The Indicative Management Plan For the proposed Camden Sound Marine Park; and,
3. Submission to the Chairman of the EPA on the Strategic Assessment Review of the LNG Precinct at James Price Point.

Their talk drew on those documents, all three of which are now available on their website (<http://kimberleywhales.blogspot.com/>). The documents contain data, maps and images. A précis of that information follows.

The annual migration

Every year, several thousand Humpback whales migrate to tropical Kimberley waters from freezing Antarctic waters (their summer feeding grounds). The whales, which are part of Western Australia's "Breeding Stock D" population, and thus distinct from those migrating along the east coast, find a tranquil resting, calving and feeding area in the coastal waters between Broome and Camden Sound. Other cetaceans sighted along the coast include Pilot Whales, Pygmy Killer Whales, Killer Whales, Spinner Dolphins, Bottle-nose Dolphins, Dugong and Australian Snub-fin dolphins.

The Breeding Stock D population, which is the largest such population in the world, is thought to number somewhere between 22,000 and 30,000. The migrating whales travel over 6,700 km each way during their incredible trips. Researchers who have monitored the migrations say that the distances travelled can exceed 60km in 24 hours, particularly where adult whales without calves are concerned.

Kimberley Whale Surveys

Some of our knowledge about this humpback whale migration comes from independent surveys conducted by Kimberley Whale Watching in 2008, 2009 and 2010. Those surveys, undertaken between Broome and Camden Sound, were made possible through the generosity of Odyssey Expeditions, the Great Escape Charter Company, and Kimberley Quest.

In 2008, *Kimberley Quest 1* was made available for three trips, and MV *Odyssey* was made available for one. The surveys between 27 June and 12 September recorded a total of 358 pods containing 645 whales. Eighty-six of the whales were cows or calves.

In 2009, the first of the season's migrating whales were seen on 30 May, 20 nautical miles west of Broome. In July the Wilderness Society chartered the *Odyssey* to carry

out one dedicated whale survey trip with Kimberley Whale Watching, from Broome to Camden Sound, and back to Cape Leveque. During that survey, Kimberley Whale Watching recorded 582 pods, representing 969 whales that included 98 calves. Kimberley Whale Watching conducted a second whale watching trip on the *Odyssey* in September 2009. An aerial survey was conducted on 30 August during the peak migration period to get an indication of the concentration and distribution of humpback whales between Gourdon Bay (south of Broome) and the Lacepede Islands (to the north). In other work done between 16 July and 17 September, Sentosa Charters (Broome) recorded sightings of 270 whales, of which 41 were calves. Significant numbers of the cows and calves were seen in the Broome area, and it appears that Collier Bay is an important resting area for cows and calves. On 19 September, eleven cows with calves were recorded between that bay and the Horizontal Waterfalls. Some mothers with late calves were still in Camden Sound or Collier Bay as late as the first week of October, and others were near Broome.

The 2009 sightings have been plotted on a satellite image that shows the whales close to the coast, especially off Broome (between Gourdon Bay and James Price Point). Concentrations are evident around the Lacepede Islands and in the waters between Koolan Island and Camden Sound.

A second map shows combined data from the 2009 and 2010 Kimberley Cetacean Surveys, with the concentrations more noticeable around the Lacepede Islands and extending north-east to Adele Island before swinging in to Camden Sound. That map also identifies the locations of the cow/calf pairs, Bottle-nose Dolphins and Snub-fin dolphins. The latter were most evident in the Prince Regent River.

The maps and survey results record only the concentration and distribution of whales on the survey tracks at the time of survey. They should not be taken as the actual number of individual whales in the area. The recordings of the whales either side of Adele Island in 2010, for example, reflected the findings of an extended whales and reefs expedition that was undertaken between 16 and 23 August. It tested the extent of the calving and feeding area between Camden Sound and Adele Island and between Adele Island and the Lacepede Islands. Kimberley Whale Watching collaborated with the Wilderness Society on that survey, which recorded a total of 455 whales, including 21 calves. The highest concentration of whales – 126 pods (198 whales, including 7 calves) over an 11-hour period – was seen through the outer shoals between Adele Island and the Lacepede Islands.

The 2010 surveys were similar in design to those of 2009 but were done with the aim of comparing abundance and distribution of the whales within state waters between Broome, the proposed industrial precinct at James Price Point, Pender Bay (north of Beagle Bay), and Camden Sound. Between Broome and the Lacepede Islands, one survey from 27 June to 28 August recorded 167 pods (268 adults, 13 cows and 13 calves). Sightings over a similar period in Camden Sound recorded 80 pods (144 adults, 5 cows and 5 calves). In total, the 2010 surveys, which included a spot aerial survey on 5 September, recorded 558 pods (846 adults, 48 cows and 49 calves). Other sightings at Eco Beach recorded 81 pods (148 adults, 20 cows and 20 calves).

In 2010, the first whales reported on the Kimberley coast were spotted at Talboys Rock (north of James Price Point) on 24 May. Seven months later, in the middle of December, whales were still being sighted off flat rocks near James Price Point. During the peak migration period, the highest whale concentrations were recorded between Adele Island and the Lacepede Islands (18 whales per hour), between the Lacepede Islands and Broome (15.85 whales per hour), and in Camden Sound (13.2 whales per hour). The percentage of calves in the population was highest between

the Lacedpede Islands and Broome (8.1%) but the 2010 surveys recorded only half the number of calves recorded in 2009. This was partly due to a smaller sample size in 2010 and a shorter survey period, which did not include the September period when the percentage of cows and calves in the population would have been higher. The lower percentage of calves is nonetheless seen to raise concerns over the status of the Breeding Stock D population of humpback whales.

Feeding behaviour

The feeding behaviour of humpback whales in the Kimberley is still poorly understood but anecdotal reports from several local sources have confirmed that the whales are feeding there. They have been observed skim feeding and lunge feeding as well as herding baitfish along fringing reefs and headlands. They are known to be opportunistic feeders that may target baitfish along the Western Australian coast. In the 2009 and 2010 surveys, high concentrations of baitfish were seen in areas where high concentrations of whales were recorded. Personal observations over the past ten years along the Kimberley Coast have convinced Richard and Annabelle that the productive tidal zone in inshore waters is an important feeding area for Breeding Stock D humpback whales. They surmise that the availability of suitable prey in the Kimberley for opportunity feeding may have contributed to a reported 10-12% increase in this population over the past 10 years.

Opportunity feeding has also been observed off Eden on the south coast of NSW. Research into the feeding behaviour and feeding ecology of humpback whales in southern NSW is currently being researched by Dr. Rebecca Dunlop and Dr. Michael Noad from the University of Queensland.

The relative importance of coastal feeding areas may increase if there is a further decline in the krill biomass to critical levels in the Southern Ocean. The extent of the krill decline is not adequately defined or understood but scientists are concerned about it. Quotas on the harvesting of krill came into effect in 1992 as part of the Antarctic treaty system, with the annual catch averaging between 100,000 and 125,000 tonnes since then. A record catch of just over 211,000 tonnes forced the closure of the fishery near the Antarctic Peninsula on 10 October 2010. With these krill thought to be the main feed source for the Breeding Stock D, their abundance and availability seem critical to the whales' survival both in the Southern Ocean and on the long migration to the Kimberley coast. The mortality rate of the Breeding Stock D is inherently difficult to determine but Richard and Annabelle believe that a recent spike in reported deaths and strandings is cause for concern.

Status of the population

The conservation classification of the humpback whale is as follows:

- *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Australian Government): Vulnerable to Extinction
- *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950* (Western Australian Government): Vulnerable to Extinction
- *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* (Global): Least Concern

The recognition of the whales' vulnerability under the *EPBC Act 1999* led to the National Heritage Trust implementing the *Humpback Whale Recovery Plan 2005 – 2010*. That plan incorporates an undertaking to protect habitat critical to the survival of the whales, e.g. ecosystem processes on which the whales rely and areas known

to seasonally support significant aggregations of whales. Known calving, resting and feeding areas and certain sections of the migratory pathways are seen as important. Currently known calving areas identified by the National Heritage Trust include the Southern Kimberley between Broome and the northern end of Camden Sound. The importance of Kimberley waters as a calving, resting and feeding area needs further research.

Protecting the whales from threats

The proposed Industrial Precinct at James Price Point is being assessed under Section 146 of the *EPBC Act 1999*. Part of that Section requires that “The Minister must not act inconsistently with ... (b) A recovery plan for the species or community or threat abatement plan”.

The potential threats to humpback whales need to be considered in a broad context. That context embraces the range of threats that the whales face from Southern Ocean fishing, mortality events during their migration along the Western Australian coast, and the cumulative impacts of a massive increase in the development of the offshore oil and gas industry along the northwest coast.

Richard and Annabelle believe that the Western Australian Government and the Federal Government should be adopting a precautionary approach to protecting critical habitat in known baitfish and whale aggregation areas along the Kimberley coast. They note that the area between Broome and the Lacepede Islands has been recognized as one of the biodiversity hotspots in the NW Marine Bioregion in both state and federal waters. Humpback whales have been observed feeding around Boileau Patches, Grey Shoals and Talboys Rock, all of which fall within the zone of influence for the proposed heavy industrial precinct for James Price Point.

The *Humpback Whale Recovery Plan 2005 – 2010* states that:

Humpback whales use habitat seasonally and can typically be found along various parts of the Australian coastline for up to nine months of the year (April to December). Anthropogenic activities have the potential to degrade habitat important to the species. These activities may degrade habitat by operating at times that coincide with the presence of whales, or they may occur when whales are absent, but degrade habitat suitability on a permanent or semi-permanent basis.

These activities may include:

- acoustic pollution (e.g. commercial and recreational vessel noise, and seismic survey activity);
- entanglement (e.g. in marine debris, fishing and aquaculture equipment);
- physical injury and death from ship strike;
- built structures that impact on habitat availability and/or use (e.g. marinas, wharves, aquaculture installations, mining or drilling infrastructure);
- changing water quality and pollution (e.g. runoff from land based agriculture, oil spills, outputs from aquaculture); and
- changes to water flow regimes causing extensive sedimentation or erosion or altered currents in near shore habitat (e.g. canals and dredging).

Richard and Annabelle’s Submission on the Strategic Assessment Review of the LNG Precinct at James Price Point lists some of the anthropogenic activities that they believe will have an impact on the whales in the adjacent area. They also note that a proposal for another industrial port facility for Point Torment (near Derby) gives rise to the prospect of further industrial shipping impacting on Kimberley whales.

Further reading

www.dec.wa.gov.au/content/view/5665/2297/ (proposed Camden Sound Marine Park)

www.dsd.wa.gov.au/8249.aspx (Strategic Assessment at James Price Point)

www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/recovery/m-novaeangliae/pubs/m-novaeangliae.pdf (*Humpback Whale Recovery Plan 2005 – 2010*)

www.environment.gov.au/epbc/notices/assessments/kimberley.html (Strategic assessment of the Browse Basin liquefied natural gas precinct)

www.kimberleywhales.com.au (survey reports and other information about whales and cruises)

Cathie Clement

KIMBERLEY FOOTBALLER “ELECTRIFYING” IN NAB CUP DEBUT

On Sunday 13 February I was present at Subiaco Oval for the debut of Lewis Broome in his first game for the Eagles. Broome started in the Eagles second game which was against the Dockers and brought attention to himself by forcing a turnover, grabbing the ball and passing off to a fellow Claremont player who scored a goal. It was described by *The West Australian* as an “electrifying cameo”.

Not only that but he featured in a photograph which took up at least half of the back page of *The West Australian* on Valentine’s Day, being carried by Ryan Neates. There was also another big photo of him on the second back page next day. In the official NAB Cup guide it mentioned his best on ground appearance in the Claremont Reserves Premiership in 2010, which had followed his performance the previous year in the Claremont Colts where he had scored four goals in six minutes and won the MEL Whinnen Medal.

He had also featured in an article in the *Sunday Times* on 13 February as being the shortest player in the AFL at 167 cm and weighing 62 kg. In fact the next shortest player was his team mate Ryan Neates at 169 cm. It was also pointed out that he weighs exactly half as much as the Dockers Ruckman, Aaron Sandilands.

Two weeks later, there was quite a reasonable sized article in the *Sunday Times* entitled “Looma Laps up Rookie Fever”. Apparently when the NAB Cup game between West Coast and Fremantle was broadcast in Looma the entire football team piled into the Coach’s house and, whenever Lewis Broome went near the ball, the noise was deafening. Further on there is a mention of the Looma School Principal Paul Eaglestone, who has followed this young man’s career since he was five. In the background to the photograph of Broome running, holding a Sherrin football, there is some fan mail from his relatives, with one signing off as “your bruch”. I am not sure of the meaning of this word but one of the letters was from his cousin sister who said she was very proud to be from Looma and to be his relative and to see him playing on television. Apparently 40 such letters from children at Looma school were delivered to him before his first game.

In another article in the same *Sunday Times* he again took the headlines with “Broome sizzles but Falcons take the honours”. This was describing his first game for the Claremont Seniors in a practice game against West Perth and he was described as providing “glimpses of brilliance in the third quarter”.

This young man has already attracted the attention of both main newspapers in Perth and I am sure there will be more to come this year. If anyone would like to add to this article and knows of other Kimberley players playing for other AFL teams their copy would be most welcome at the Editor’s email.

Jack Vercoe

BOOK NOTE

Joan Rogasch (compiler), *Lil's Story: The Story of Sister Mary Elizabeth Rogasch*. Peacock Publications, Norwood (SA), 2010, 222 pp., illustrated, map, ISBN 978-0-9807855-0-0.

Our February newsletter carried a note about *Memoirs of a Nurse*. In that book, Mary McCombe (nee Rogasch), having lightly masked her characters, wrote about Halls Creek and its Australian Inland Mission (AIM) hospital. Mary's family and friends knew her as Lil and, in *Lil's Story*, Joan Rogasch pays tribute to that hardy woman by turning her journals, photographs and poetry into a book. The result is somewhat disjointed, due to large gaps in the journals, but it provides interesting glimpses of events, places, and people encountered over a period of about 24 years. The material varies in style, ranging from comments about everyday happenings to prose that celebrates the beauty of nature and applauds the strength of individuals.

Lil wrote most of her journals in pencil, sometimes retaining only a carbon copy. Preparing that material for publication presented the usual range of problems that come with transcribing old, handwritten notes in which some words, especially the names of people and places, are either unclear or illegible. The editor's footnotes help to clarify some points and illuminate others but readers in search of historical data may need to do further research.

Lil's Story starts in 1917 at Oodnadatta, where Lil, aged 36, was on her first AIM posting. She had qualified as a Probationer Nurse at Adelaide Children's Hospital in 1909, an Obstetrical Nurse (1910) and an Inspector of Nuisances (1915). The 1910 training made her eligible for registration as a midwife. The Oodnadatta jottings give way to others about Hergott (Marree), Kangaroo Island, and the "Mareeba" Babies' Hospital in Woodville (SA). Lil then went to the Kimberley, arriving in September 1918 as the region's first fully-qualified AIM nursing sister. She served at Halls Creek until 1921 and later wrote about those years in *Memoirs*.

The Kimberley component of *Lil's Story* starts in Chapter 4 with material that was found at the last minute and inserted into an almost completed manuscript because it was too good to leave out. In it, Lil tells of her second trip to Halls Creek—the first one having been a rushed motor vehicle trip prompted by a medical emergency. This rare firsthand account of women travelling in the Kimberley mentions several female residents, particularly young Katie Bridge from Springvale Station. Other women then emerge when Lil takes up her nursing at the end of the fortnight-long horse and buggy trip. It is, however, the men who receive the most coverage. After mentioning them once, Lil often uses only their nicknames or the initial from their surnames.

Chapter 5 contains random Halls Creek jottings for 1919. Chapter 6 is a collation of published accounts written about or by Lil and taken mostly from *The Inlander*, which the Rev. John Flynn edited. Other more personal writing follows, leading into the period when Lil, who married Cecil David (Mac) McCombe in 1923, lived in Wyndham. Valuable material there includes journal entries about the 1929 search for the aircraft *Southern Cross*. Chapter 13 recounts Mac and Lil's adventurous driving tour from Wyndham to Perth via the east coast, before they resumed their lives in Wyndham. Chapter 14 records the landing of the *Abel Tasman* in 1931, some two or three years before Lil and Mac moved south to live in Corrigin.

Lil's Story can be purchased by sending a \$55 cheque or money order (made payable to J.I. Rogasch) to 9 Willoughby Street, Klemzig, SA 5087. That price includes postage within Australia.

Cathie Clement

REST IN PEACE

On 6 January, John Rogers passed away at the Peel Campus Hospital, aged 80, after a long illness. A member of the Kimberley Society since 1999, John had a strong connection with the Kimberley. He was involved with the early days of Coastwatch, which came into being when the Department of Transport was responsible for coastal surveillance. It employed John from 1983 to 1988 as the Senior Surveillance Resource Officer in Broome, a position that enabled him to draw on strengths gained from his service with the Royal Navy prior to his emigration to Australia. In June 2003, he spoke to the Kimberley Society about his Coastwatch days, entertaining the audience with his dry anecdotes about surveillance flights. A summary of his talk appeared in the *Boab Bulletin* in August 2003 and is available online. John remained with Coastwatch until 1992, having moved to Darwin when the organisation came under the control of the Australian Customs Service. He then did other work in Darwin before enjoying retirement in Bouvard to the south of Perth. John is survived by his wife Patricia (Jodie).

On 13 March, Athel McComb (nee Hockey) passed away. Born and educated in Victoria, she came to Western Australia in 1954, seven years after marrying fellow University of Melbourne graduate Harold McComb. Both became prominent in their medical fields, with Athel's career embracing involvement with the University of Western Australia, the Slow Learning Children's Group (later Activ), the Disability Services Commission, the Birth Defects Registry of Western Australia, the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Princess Margaret Hospital, and many other doctors and researchers. All of that was combined with family life and raising four sons. In 1991, Athel was made an Officer of the Order of Australia for service to medicine, particularly through the care of people with disabilities and to medical education about the genetic implications of certain disabilities. A few years later, when the Kimberley Society formed, the McCombs added it to their many other interests. A celebration of Athel's life and her work took place on 21 March at Royal Freshwater Bay Yacht Club in the Perth suburb of Peppermint Grove.

Cathie Clement

KUNUNURRA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Our friends at the Kununurra Historical Society (KHS) have been very busy on projects linked to celebrations in the town: 70 years of tropical agriculture; 50 years of Kununurra and the commercial Ord River Irrigation Area; and 25 years of the historical society itself. A Kimberley History Site (www.kununurra.org.au) has been established and it contains, among other things, copies of the "Looking Back" articles researched for the KHS column in the *Kimberley Echo*. One titled "Kununurra's name has a rich history" mentions the role played by Kimberley Society member John Lewis in the naming of the town. The research file for the 1959-1960 nomenclature is available with the article. Other new articles will be added throughout the year.

Hundreds of images have been uploaded to www.flickr.com/photos/khs-museum in sets organised by subject themes (11 sets so far), collections (4) and decades (39 sets). Subject Themes include "Ivanhoe Crossing" (connected with our member Bill Wright); the 1972 "Opening Ceremony Top Dam"; and "KHS Now & Then". The latter set currently contains 28 views in which old images are positioned against new ones. The Collections comprise photos taken and/or donated by: Cyril Ion (193 photos); Dennis O'Brien (33); Mr Keene & Mr Roy Walker (226); and Ric Roberts OAM (71). At last count www.flickr.com/photos/khs-museum had 744 items. Well done KHS!!!

MONTARA OIL SPILL

Since 21 August 2009, when a blowout at the Montara Wellhead Platform triggered Australia's third largest oil spill, millions of words have been written about that event, its cause, and the steps that can be taken to prevent future incidents. The official documents (www.ret.gov.au/montarainquiryresponse) include:

- *Report of the Montara Commission of Inquiry* [presented in June 2010 and released by the Australian Government on 24 November 2010];
- the government's draft response to that report [released on the same date];
- the PTTEP Australasia (Ashmore-Cartier) Pty Ltd (PTTEP Australasia) Montara Action Plan [released 4 June 2010 and updated since then]
- the report of the Independent Review of the PTTEP Australasia ... Montara Action Plan [released 4 February 2011];
- *Deed of Agreement between Commonwealth and PTTEP* [executed 23 February 2011].

The *Report of the Montara Commission of Inquiry* read in part:

The Inquiry has concluded that PTTEP Australasia (Ashmore Cartier) Pty Ltd (PTTEPAA) did not observe sensible oilfield practices at the Montara Oilfield. Major shortcomings in the company's procedures were widespread and systemic, directly leading to the Blowout.

Well control practices approved by the delegate of the Designated Authority (DA), the Northern Territory Department of Resources (the NT DoR), most likely would have been sufficient to prevent the Blowout if PTTEPAA had adhered to them and to its own Well Construction Standards. However, the NT DoR was not a sufficiently diligent regulator... The way the regulator (the NT DoR) conducted its responsibilities gave it little chance of discovering PTTEPAA's poor practices. In this case, the regulatory dog did not bark.

The report contains 100 findings and 105 recommendations, which have implications for governments, regulators, and the offshore petroleum industry. The government's draft response proposes accepting 92 of those recommendations, noting ten, and not accepting three. The three-month consultation period on the draft government response concluded on 25 February 2011. Of the 15 submissions received, 13 are available publicly (through the website noted above). Those submissions came from:

1. ExxonMobil
2. WWF-Australia
3. Australian Marine Oil Spill Centre Pty Ltd (AMOSOC)
4. Australian Institute of Marine Science
5. Northern Territory Government
6. Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association Limited
7. Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices (ANEDO)
8. Environs Kimberley Inc
9. Plexus Oceans Systems
10. Government of Western Australia, Department of Mines and Petroleum
11. West Timor Care Foundation
12. Chevron
13. Mr Wayne Needoba

Many of the submissions mention the April 2010 oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico. Some point to the similarities in the causes of the two spills. Annex 1 in the WWF-Australia submission goes further and identifies US National Commission recommendations that are also seen to apply to offshore oil & gas drilling in Australia. Valuable lessons have been learned and, while there is still much to be done, the way forward has been paved by the Australian Government accepting the Commission of Inquiry's recommendation (No. 73) that a single, independent regulatory body be created to look after safety as a primary objective, well integrity and environmental approvals.

SOBERING IMPACTS OF A RECORD WET SEASON

The Kimberley has had one of its biggest Wet seasons on record and, despite April being the traditional start of the Dry season, monsoonal activity is expected to continue. On the night of 10 January, the North and West Kimberley experienced rainfall in excess of 200mm, prompting the Bureau of Meteorology to issue flood warnings. It cancelled those warnings on the 12th but, in mid-February, it again put the region on Flood Watch as ex-Tropical Cyclone Carlos looked like re-forming into a cyclone off the West Kimberley coast. Life was back to normal in early March with pastoralists looking forward to fat cattle and high prices in a bumper mustering season. Some were even concerned that their cattle could exceed the 350 kilogram weight range for export to Indonesia.

Then, over the weekend of 12 and 13 March, 310mm of rain saturated Warmun (200km SSW of Kununurra). As well as being the wettest two-day period since February 1907, when 305mm soaked the little township, that deluge caused flash flooding. Turkey Creek broke its banks, destroying or damaging all of Warmun's 65 houses. The 1.5m floodwaters also inundated the community's internationally-renowned art centre, destroying thousands of paintings worth millions of dollars. Over the next few days, with the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) pitching in, helicopters and buses took more than 250 residents to vacant workers' accommodation at Garrjang Village in Kununurra. En route, some of the evacuees would have seen the Ord Dam, which rose 1.65m in 24 hours (exceeding its 2001 record level) and produced an overflow of more than one million litres per second.

Warmun is uninhabitable and at least 30 houses will need to be demolished. The WA government has formed the Warmun Aboriginal Community Re-establishment Taskforce to coordinate the recovery efforts, promising an initial sum of \$500,000 to help rebuild housing and infrastructure and meet the acute needs of the evacuees.

Flooding also isolated other communities, limited access to towns, and necessitated airlifts of food and drinking water. By 14 March, the closure of a section of the Great Northern Highway had cut access between Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek, and the river level at the Crossing was heading for a record-breaking height. It reached 13.05 metres on the 15th, and, by the next morning, it exceeded the record 2002 flood level. It began receding slowly but not without extensive flooding downstream.

By the 20th, the floods and the damage to roads and bridges had created enormous logistical problems across the Kimberley. Food was flown into Halls Creek and some small communities while road trains were diverted through the centre of Australia to take fruit and vegetables to Kununurra. The diversions added up to 48 hours to delivery times, with the cost passed on to the consumer. Derby, too, became isolated due to the rising water levels at the Willare bridge. That water partly washed away the region's only fibre-optic cable, causing several days' disruption to telephones (mobiles included), the internet and EFTPOS machines.

The Great Northern Highway reopened to all traffic between Broome and Derby on 24 March. It also became possible to truck fuel into Halls Creek. To the north, however, highway access between Halls Creek and Warmun remained limited. The floodwater runoff also boosted the water levels in Lake Argyle, which was at 194 per cent capacity by the 25th, and still rising. As well as drowning cattle, the rising waters stranded hundreds of agile wallabies on a small area of land with little food. What was once a rocky promontory became an island approximately 10km from the shore. The animals will probably remain stranded for at least two or three months but the Department of Environment and Conservation is monitoring their plight.

Each day brought fresh news, with roads being progressively opened to traffic but closed again at intervals for emergency repairs. Gibb River Road remained closed to all traffic between the Wyndham turn-off and the Lennard River after the section between Derby and the Lennard River was opened to vehicles of three tonnes or less. Drivers who braved the wet roads faced encounters with potholes, loose surfaces, and wandering livestock and wildlife. FESA continued to supply food, water, medical supplies and other essential items to flood-affected, indigenous communities such as Ringer Soak (out of Halls Creek). People from some of the other communities sought accommodation in the towns. The Ngallagunda residents, for instance, relocated to Derby to wait for flood waters to recede, roads to reopen, and damage to be assessed.

The Health Department upgraded its mosquito warning. No cases of the Murray Valley encephalitis or Kunjin viruses were confirmed but the surveillance program detected them at several locations. Reports of Ross River and Barmah Forest viruses increased.

Flood-affected people in the local government areas of Derby/West-Kimberley, Halls Creek, and Wyndham/East-Kimberley may be entitled to financial help through the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements. As well as providing capped payments for emergency accommodation, food, essential clothing and other personal items, the NDRRA fund covers temporary living expenses, up to \$10,000 for housing repairs, and up to \$10,500 for replacement of essential household contents. The fund also provides help for local governments, small businesses, and primary producers, e.g. to replace boundary fences along major roads.

WHALES IN THE KIMBERLEY

If you missed the Kimberley Society's December talk, you can hear Richard Costin at The Western Australian Naturalists' Club meeting on Friday, 1 April 2011. The event will be held at the Hew Roberts Lecture Theatre, Clifton St, Nedlands (UWA Nedlands Campus; not the main campus) commencing at 7:30 PM.

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