



# Sponges safe from turtles

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SCIENTISTS have ruled a sponge farm in the Torres Strait is in no danger of being decimated by ravenous sea turtles.

More than 8000 sponges have been planted at Australia's first sponge farm at Yorke Island, also known as Masig Island.

It was feared that hawksbill turtles, which have been known to eat sponges, would be attracted to the farm and either consume the crops or become entangled in farm equipment and netting.

But James Cook University researcher Mariana Fuentes said her recent study revealed there was no danger of the turtles going near the farm.

In fact, in two visits to the island, the scientists

say they were only able to spot six Hawksbill turtles.

Ms Fuentes said the low number of turtles would not cause any impact to the farm.

"We checked to see whether they were eating the same sponges as the sponges that were being farmed there," she said.

"We found that they weren't.

"And when we did transects around the island, we didn't find or see any interactions between the turtles and the sponge farm."

The sponge farm is being managed locally by Kailag Enterprises and was established by CRC Torres Strait, the Torres Strait Regional Authority, Yorke Island Community Council and the Australian Institute of Marine Science.

The farm employs local indigenous workers and it is hoped it will enable Australia to contribute to the \$40 million bath sponge industry, creating substantial economic benefits to Torres Strait communities.

The possibility of harvesting the crop for potentially lucrative biotechnological applications is also being examined.

AIMS researcher Libby Evans-Illidge, who helped set up the farm, said the sponge farm was an excellent demonstration of the uptake and use of contemporary science.

"It's a great case study, I think," Dr Illidge said.

"The farm is now a permanent feature on marine charts."