

Newsletter of the Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise

A new home?

The day dawned sunny and auspicious on August 11 for the release of two dozen zoo-bred tortoises under a newly approved assisted colonisation trial program.

We gathered at the Manjimup Dept of Parks & Wildlife office to await the arrival of Dr Gerald Kuchling with the carefully selected animals. All had been chosen by Gerald, Dr Nicki Mitchell and their students on the basis of their weight (100-140g, median 122g), incubation regime (29°C, 24°C or a cyclical temperature) and all were roughly three years old.



Tortoise with tracking antenna



When they arrived, Gerald showed a couple of them to us. The local Aboriginal elders Sandra Hill and Gwenda Chapman welcomed animals and scientists to their country. There was an air of excitement; the Aboriginal people were particularly thrilled. Sandra and her brother Daryl, Gwenda and also young Maitland Scrimgeour all held the animals before we set off for the site.

On the unsealed road south of

Northcliffe we could see the after-effects of the big fire that had burnt through the area the previous summer. By now it was raining steadily. Then we reached our first obstacle: a large tree, fallen across the track, with no way around it! Whilst we waited for the arrival of a man with a huge chainsaw and bobcat from the Northcliffe depot, we ate our lunch earlier than planned and tried to stay dry.

The obstacle was promptly cleared and in convoy, we could now negotiate the tricky 4WD track to the tortoises' new home: a pristine swamp amongst beautiful, low vegetation (*above*). Surely this would be paradise for the little reptiles! (*continued p2...*)

Daryl & Sandra with tortoises



(continued from front...) Once we had arranged ourselves around the edge of the water—antenna-clad tortoises in hand—and the film crew had taken some footage, we placed the animals in the water and encouraged them to swim off. Some did, but many didn't do so immediately. It was cold (about 10°C) and very wet but we hoped the temperature would not deter the tortoises. More images were recorded and we squelched our way back to the warmth and shelter of the vehicles. Some of the party then went on to release the second lot of animals near East Augusta, later that afternoon.

All the tortoises will be closely and regularly monitored by scientists for the next 12 months, before being repatriated to the zoo whilst an assessment is made of the trial. Good luck, little tortoises!

Tanya Marwood

See our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/FriendsOfTheWesternSwampTortoise/

Australian Geographic at <http://oak.ctx.ly/r/4zq4r>

and ABC News www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-12/endangered-tortoises-test-out-new-home-in-south-west/7730900?section=wa

for more images (still & moving) and information.

Quiz Night Success

The recent Quiz Night at Edgecombe Brothers Winery was a roaring success, raising over \$2000 to advance our current projects. After delicious burgers provided by Alf Edgecombe and his staff, we settled down to some intense quizzing, thanks to the questions devised by Cathy and Bruce Levett. Since they knew the answers, we got them to mark and score as well. Our MC, Peta, from Toastmasters, revved us up and kept the pace going. Chris 'Heads and Tailed' us and judged the longest Mintie Wrapper Rip—an amazing 167 centimetres.

Special thanks to the Quiz Sub-Committee—Jan, Cathy, Tanya, Bruce, Chris, Stacey, Margaret and Lee-Anne—for all their behind the scenes organisation.

Special thanks also to our generous donors, listed below. I think most tables won at least one prize.

And finally, thanks to all the participants, young and older, serious and not-so-serious, winners all.

Jan Bant

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Where are they now?

From around October-November—the Nyoongar season of Kambarang—adult breeding female tortoises (at least 8 years old) lay 3-4 eggs underground near the edges of the swamps in either natural fissures in the ground, deep leaf litter or the artificial aestivation tunnels (*left*) and take no further care of them. They and other adult and juvenile tortoises aestivate until the swamps refill in late autumn (the season of Djeran).

Perth wildlife show



Robert Boyd with WAM specimen

During July the City of Perth hosted a retrospective Wild Life Show at the Perth Town Hall. Over the 3 weeks 12,600 people came through and FOWST held a special Western Swamp Tortoise Day on July 13. The WA Museum brought the specimen that Robert Boyd rediscovered in 1953, when he was just 15. Perth Zoo also brought their education WST along (*right*). Robert recounted the story of how he found this particular animal and emphasised that 'ordinary citizens' and young people could still play a significant role in conservation.



A very specialised habitat: part 2

An ecological community is a '*naturally occurring biological assemblage that occurs in a particular type of habitat*'¹. When these communities become significantly reduced in area or distribution, or are at risk from processes which threatened to modify them, they may be listed as 'threatened ecological communities' (TECs). Threatened ecological communities are rated one of four categories: "presumed totally destroyed", "critically endangered", "endangered" or "vulnerable".

It is unlikely to come as a shock to hear that much of the preferred habitat for the Western Swamp Tortoises is already listed, or nominated for listing, as a TEC.

The vegetation community of Twin Swamps is broadly described as '*Forests and woodlands of deep seasonal wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain*' which is listed as 'vulnerable' in Western Australia. The 'vulnerable' rating is described as '*...may be still widespread but is believed likely to move into a category of higher threat in the medium to long term future because of existing or impending threatening processes*'¹.

Two of the vegetation communities that occur at Ellen Brook are listed as TECs. The '*Eucalyptus calophylla - Xanthorrhoea preisii woodlands and shrublands, Swan Coastal Plain*' ecological community is listed as 'critically endangered' in Western Australia. The 'critically endangered' rating applies when a community has been adequately surveyed and is found to be facing an extremely high risk of total destruction in the immediate future¹. This community is also listed federally under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 as 'endangered', which is applies to communities that face a high risk of extinction in the wild in the medium-term future (the indicative time frame is next 50 years)². A second vegetation community '*Herb rich shrublands in clay pans*' also occurs on Ellen Brook Nature Reserve and is listed as 'vulnerable' in Western Australia.

The '*Herb rich saline shrublands in clay pans*' TEC also occurs in the Moore River Nature Reserve. At this stage none of the vegetation communities within Mogumber Nature Reserve are listed as a TEC. This may change, however, as at least one community which is associated with the clay pan community of swamps there has been nominated for listing. Watch this space!

Aside from the Western Swamp Tortoise there are also many Threatened and Priority- listed flora species that occur in these reserves, and similarly contend with the same habitat contraction that has plagued Australia's most endangered reptile. All in all this is quite depressing news, but goes to show why our remnant bushland is so important.

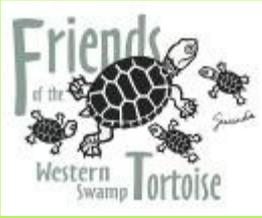
Janelle Atkinson

¹Department of Parks and Wildlife (2010). *Definitions, Categories and Criteria for Threatened and Priority Ecological Communities*. Published under Department of Environment and Conservation, Perth.

²Department of the Environment (2016). *About threatened ecological communities*, <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/communities/about#ec> (accessed 28 January 2016), Government of Australia, Canberra.

You can help save an endangered species, right on your doorstep!

Membership of the Friends is **FREE** and we have lots of great activities, including behind-the-scenes zoo visits and tortoise release days.



**Join us to help save the tortoise...
because EXTINCTION SUCKS!**

For further information on any of the group's activities, contact Jan on
9344 2872 or **0408024800**

Email: westernswamptortoise@yahoo.com.au

check out the website

www.westernswamptortoise.com

or find us on **Facebook** (Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise)



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...as well as **Boral**, the **University of Western Australia**, **Curtin University**, **Perth Zoo**, **Adelaide Zoo**, **Long Road Website Development**, **Grill'd Mount Lawley** and all the donors to the quiz night.