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Citizen scientists to help save native turtles

A Murdoch University PhD student is calling on members of the public to record their sightings of wild Oblong Turtles to help preserve the species.

Caitlin Bartholomaeus said there had been very little research into the turtle, a native freshwater species, and it was important to understand how it was reacting to urban development and a changing climate to ensure its survival.

People who live close to or who visit the turtles' habitat in wetlands of the Perth metropolitan area can log any sightings with the Turtle Watch hotline and the ClimateWatch website. Ms Bartholomaeus and her team want to know the location of the turtle, its size (compared to the size of a soft drink can), its behaviour and the time and date it was seen. They also want to know the locations of any dead turtles and nests with eggs.

"Members of the public can help us to increase monitoring levels by logging their sightings of turtles anytime, anywhere and in any condition," said Ms Bartholomaeus. "We will use this data to get a better picture of where turtles are, when they are moving and what they are doing.

"This, coupled with our own fieldwork of catching turtles, measuring them, marking them and releasing them back into the wild over the course of the spring and summer will help us make an estimation of the population size.

"At a later date, we'll start fitting some turtles with small radio trackers so we can see when they are moving and where they are going. This will help us to identify the areas of habitat they are using and when they are using it."

Ms Bartholomaeus said the collected data will help scientists make recommendations on how to meet the needs of the turtles, perhaps through improved garden and verge management.

"The lack of research on Oblong Turtles means that we currently cannot separate the threats to them from climate change and the threats from suburbia. Turtles need to leave wetlands as part of their life cycle. As such, increasing urbanisation could be a greater threat to turtle survival," she added.

"These turtles are the top predators underwater and their loss could be catastrophic for our local wetlands. This is why it is vitally important we try to understand how to help them adapt to the changes in the environment."

Oblong Turtles have very long necks which can be almost as long as their shells. The adult shell can be 30cm-40cm long and they range in colour from brown to black.

They can be found in the Beelihar Wetlands as well as in many lakes found within the Perth Metropolitan area. Ms Bartholomaeus is collaborating with the City of Cockburn, the Turtle Watch program and ClimateWatch to complete this important research.



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Any turtle sightings should be logged on the ClimateWatch website (<http://www.climatewatch.org.au/>).

Members of the public should log any sightings of turtles, nests and eggs with their closest Turtle Watch hotline eco centre:

- Cockburn Wetlands Education Centre: 9417 8460;
- Canning River Eco Education Centre: 9461 7160;
- South East Regional Centre for Urban Landcare: 9458 5664
- Herdsman Lake Wildlife Centre: 9387 6079.

Notes for editors

ClimateWatch was developed by Earthwatch with the Bureau of Meteorology and the University of Melbourne to understand how climate change is affecting the behaviour of Australia's plants and animals.

The Turtle Watch program supported by LotteryWest and AAEE WA aims to: Identify predator/s involved in the destruction of Oblong Turtle nests at three sites around Perth, and; foster partnerships between the community, research organizations, educational institutions and industry in relation to the conservation of oblong turtles.

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