

Turtle month creates awareness for reptiles in crisis

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National turtle month launches this week, coinciding with the best time of the year to catch a glimpse of female turtles as they find suitable nesting sites on the banks of rivers, lakes and dams. The event has been coined by a group of Australia's top turtle scientists with the aim of creating awareness of freshwater turtle species under threat from predatory attacks and declining habitat.

Freshwater turtle numbers in the Murray-Darling Basin have fallen significantly over the past 40 years, with at least two of three River Murray species at risk of extinction. A bold new national project – 1 Million Turtles – was recently launched to stem the decline of Australia's turtles by boosting the number of turtles in Australia's waterways.

Renowned turtle expert Mike Thompson said that many Australian freshwater turtle species are under threat with rapid declines in population numbers.

"The number of Eastern long-necked turtles in Victoria declined by 91% between 1980 and 2010 and we know that figure is substantially greater in South Australia."

"Foxes are the single biggest threat facing Australian freshwater turtles, but also road traffic and habitat changes are contributing to population declines," he added.

"The 1 Million Turtles campaign will restore turtle populations by enabling one million eggs to survive and their hatchlings to enter Australian waterways each year."

Citizen scientists encouraged to join in

Dr Sylvia Clarke, Citizen Science Project Officer at Murraylands and Riverland Landscape Board, encouraged South Australians to get involved in turtle month and play a part in helping to improve the future of the state's turtle populations.

"Turtles nest over such a large area of South Australia, we really need everyone's help to let us know when they see turtles and where they find evidence of nesting."

Citizen scientists can record sightings of turtles and nests via TurtleSAT – a free smartphone app and website accessible by anyone with a device and an internet connection.

"Uploading turtle and nest sightings on TurtleSAT helps us to locate nesting hotspots and enables us to target future conservation efforts, which people can be involved with as well," she said.



More information about turtle conservation, including ways to become involved, is available at 1MillionTurtles.com

1 Million Turtles is supported by an Australian Government Citizen Science Grant. Project partners including La Trobe University, University of Western Sydney, University of New England, Murraylands and Riverland Landscape Board, Project Checkpoint, Murdoch University and Australia's Wildlife Ark Inc.

Photo caption: The 1 Million Turtles campaign to restore turtle populations was launched in November, which is national turtle month and the best time to catch a glimpse of female turtles as they find suitable nesting sites.