

Mary River turtle

Elusor macrurus
(the elusive long-tailed escaper)



In the 1960's it was known as the 'petshop' turtle, its natural habitat being unknown. John Cann, an amateur herpetologist searched for more than 25 years to find a natural population of this turtle. Until his discovery in the early 1990's, it was unknown to science.

The Mary River turtle is one of the largest, short-necked turtles found in Australia. Identifying features are a low streamlined shell and a very large tail. The shell (carapace) of a large male can be up to 42cm in length. The tail of adult males can be up to 70% of the length of the carapace. Its low profile allows it to swim at astonishing speeds. Mary River Turtles can be observed with their snout protruding just above the surface of the water. It can also absorb oxygen while submerged via a specialised sac-like cavity (cloacal bursa) in its tail.

Most of its diet consists of filaments of algae and fruit from trees growing on the riverbank. Using its claws, it has an amazing ability to open and crush bivalves before swallowing the soft parts and some shell fragments.



Why is it endangered?

Its natural habitat is restricted to the Mary River in south-east Queensland, the only place in the world where a natural population of this turtle occurs.

During the 1960's and 70's it mass nested in the hundreds, with up to 15,000 eggs laid each year. Many of these eggs were incubated and sold through the aquarium trade prior to it becoming illegal, hence the 'petshop' turtle. Unfortunately predation by foxes, dogs, goannas and humans has continued to reduce the population, particularly juveniles. Females do not reach adulthood until approx 15-20 years old. In 2004/2005 season, 120 females were known to have laid eggs.

The turtle's restricted habitat, age of maturity, predation, flooding and changes to its habitat combine to threaten its long term survival.



What is being done to help?

The survival of any species is dependant on preservation of its habitat and a population which includes all age classes. Since 2001, Tiaro Landcare has been giving talks about the turtle, protecting nests to increase the survival of hatchlings and funding a support scholarship for post-graduate student.

Many landholders, businesses and organisations have assisted Tiaro Landcare in their goal of assisting this endangered species which lives on their 'doorstep'.

