

# Rare tortoise tracked for 50 years

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This rare 67-year-old western swamp tortoise was tagged by researchers in 1963. EFFORTS to save one of the world's rarest tortoises reached a major milestone this week with the oldest known living individual having been monitored for 50 years.

Environment Minister Albert Jacob paid tribute to the conservation effort to save the western swamp tortoise, which was once thought to be extinct, but now more than 300 were known to exist. Mr Jacob said the western swamp tortoise Australia's rarest reptile and the conservation work had involved radio-tracking some of the animals for half a century. He marked the conservation anniversary by inspecting the fourth tortoise to be tracked under the program.

"Today, we radio-tracked and inspected female tortoise 'No.4' - she was the fourth tortoise to be marked - that was 50 years ago on October 2, 1963 at Ellen Brook Nature Reserve, north-east of Perth," he said. "At more than 65-years-old, she is still contributing to the survival of the species, recently laying a clutch of five eggs -- the tortoises are tiny; each fitting into the palm of your hand and yet they can live as long as people."

He said the western swamp tortoise was responding well to recovery efforts with wild and captive-bred populations now stable after a tumultuous journey that saw numbers plummet in the late 1980s. "The steady recovery of this unique species is testament to the hard work and persistence of many dedicated people including scientists, volunteers and conservation workers," Mr Jacob said. "The western swamp tortoise was thought to be extinct until it was rediscovered in 1953. "Subsequently, community support led to the creation of two new nature reserves to protect the wild populations and a captive breeding program at the Perth Zoo."

By 1987, the estimated wild population was just 39, with another 17 in captivity which were not reproducing. Now, there are an estimated 175 tortoises within conservation reserves, including just under 50 adults, and a further 184 in the Perth Zoo breeding program.

The hard work is continuing with the State Government recently allocating \$500,000 of State Natural Resource Management funding over three years to DPaW to support continued recovery actions for the species. "We have also committed more than \$1 million to design and construct a state-of-the-art new captive breeding facility at the Perth Zoo to replace existing infrastructure and continue the program well into the future."