

Newsletter of the Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise

Fire at Ellen Brook Nature Reserve

Thank you to all our Friends who have been concerned about the well-being of the Western Swamp Tortoises after the dreadful fires that ravaged the Ellen Brook Nature Reserve on February 5, 2021. Around 90% of the reserve, habitat of the last self-sustaining tortoise population, was affected. Some areas have been totally burnt out and only black ash remains, but there are several areas of trees, burned but still standing, which should come back. Also, one of the areas recently planted may regenerate from the light burning it experienced.

The Reserve was burnt from Great Northern Highway to Almeria St and fence to fence. Trees along Lexia St, on the other side of the road, were virtually untouched. The fire stopped at the western fence and didn't cross the rail line.



In the immediate aftermath one large juvenile Western Swamp Tortoise (WST) was rescued, cared for by Chief Investigative Scientist, Gerald Kuchling, rehydrated and released back into the reserve. .../p2

One dead tortoise was found by Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attraction staff (DBCA is the land manager) on Saturday, 6 February within the area impacted by the fire. No other injured or dead tortoises have been found to date.

A trained detection dog, Dazzy (*see opposite page*), engaged through Terrestrial Ecosystems, went onsite with DBCA and Perth Zoo staff on Saturday, 6 February. No tortoises were detected in the area that was searched, i.e. in and around the fire containment lines.

Below: Land managers and conservation staff assessing damage inside the reserve after the fire



Fortunately, these little reptiles are superbly adapted to their ecological niche and the bushfire season coincides with their aestivation (a kind of torpor). They should all have been cosily tucked up underground while the fire swept overhead. Just to be sure, DBCA staff did regular sweeps, to find and help the tortoises, or any other animals living in the reserve.

Additional sand pads for predator monitoring have been established within the reserve, to be watched and used to determine the quantity and timing of additional, post-fire feral animal control.

DBCA staff are preparing a rehabilitation plan for revegetating the areas cleared by firefighters and to enhance cover in key habitat areas.

Our immediate priority has been to replace the section of feral-proof fence damaged in the firefighting efforts. The fence has a electric hot-wire at the top (run by solar panels within the reserve) and a skirt under the ground to prevent feral animals digging their way in. It needs expert installation by DBCA staff.

Part of funds donated by generous members of the public has been earmarked for equipment to monitor tortoises as they leave aestivation in early winter. PhD candidate Nick Rodriguez is working with Gerald Kuchling to check the health of tortoises and eggs.

The next most pressing requirement is tube stock for replanting. Thanks to our colleagues at Chittering Landcare, about 6000 appropriate plants will be available for this season. Planting will be in late June and July, when the winter rains are well established. It was too late to order more seedlings, and all nurseries are under pressure from many groups all wanting to revegetate their patch after this widespread fire. We will be ordering more plants in September, for the 2022 planting season.

In order to do something right now, the Friends held a very successful seed-bomb making session on Saturday 6 March, 2021 at Dianella Primary College. We made small balls of clay, compost and local provenance seeds. They have been dried and stored until the planting day in late June, when we will distribute them in areas of the nature reserve that are difficult to reach. When the rain comes, they break down and the seeds germinate. This way we will have a succession of growing, with tube stock giving an early coverage, followed by the germinating seeds.

All donations to the Friends group received from February 1, 2021 will be used for fire mitigation. Our donation method is via direct deposit to BSB 036308, account 201858. All donors can be provided with a receipt upon request to the email on the back page.

Conservation dogs help the tortoise

(Background from the WWF newsletter, *Living Planet*)

Dogs have a sense of smell that's thousands of times more sensitive than ours, so conservationists are using them to find, and protect, vulnerable native species. In the field, they can detect the presence of target species from their scat. Dogs are trained to associate the scent of a particular animal scat with a toy and then when a scat is found, they are rewarded with a game.

The DBCA believes a conservation dog trained to sniff out turtles and tortoises will assist scientists find animals, especially in areas near wetlands currently being cleared for development. Dazzy, the detection dog (*below*), found no tortoises at Ellen Brook NR in and around the containment lines.



Where are they now?

May (Autumn / Djeran): Eggs hatch from late autumn to early winter, and the hatchlings are about as big as a ten cent coin. They may wait in their nests until the swamps fill enough.

June-July (Winter / Makuru): All the tortoises enter the swamps once they sense the time has come to leave their aestivation places or nests and the water reaches a couple of centimetres depth. They only live in non-perennial (i.e. temporary) shallow swamps with a clay base, where much of the surrounding land is predominantly sand. They begin to feed on small crustaceans and aquatic insect larva to quickly build up their body mass.



Young tortoise in shallow water at Twin Swamps NR.

Like a presentation for your school or group?

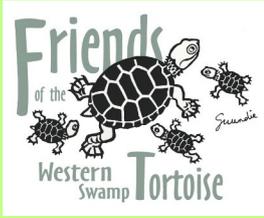
If you know of a **school or community group** that would like us to come and talk please contact Jan on 0408 024 800 or Cathy via westernswamptortoise@yahoo.com.au.

At schools we include an exciting free games session for the younger children.



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

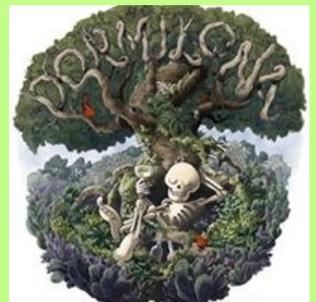
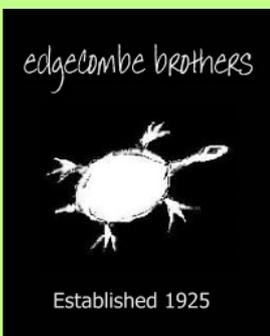
check out the website www.westernswamptortoise.com

or find us on **Facebook** www.facebook.com/FriendsOfTheWesternSwampTortoise/ where we usually post the very latest news.

Committee: Jan Bant, Chair; Tanya Marwood, Vice-chair; Bob Height, Treasurer; Pippa McLeery, Secretary; Cathy Levett (general); education sub-committee—Jan Bant & Cathy Levett.



Our current sponsors and recovery partners include:



...as well as **Boral**, the **University of Western Australia**, **Curtin University** and **Adelaide Zoo**.