



AFTCRA Inc.

Australian Freshwater Turtle Conservation and Research Association

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NEWSLETTER 7 April 2008

Dear Members and Friends,

We hope you and your families are well and had a lovely Easter!

Firstly, thanks again to everyone who has continued to support AFTCRA Inc. by renewing their memberships and a very warm welcome to all new members.

There have been many interesting events since our last Newsletter. Craig and I have done many stalls to spread the word about AFTCRA Inc. as well as worked very hard to make the true information available regarding Traveston Dam and the turtles of the Mary River.

Our survey of the turtles of the Mary River has slowed due to the floods in August, and again in January. Diving there has been impossible as it is like diving in chocolate milk. This survey would be even more impossible without Craig's assistance as he has literally caught every turtle we have surveyed, by hand- thanks Craig! Thanks also to Jordan Latta for her assistance scribing the morphometric data for this survey. Although this survey is high on our priority list, due to the absolute importance of the information we have been obtaining and it's relevance in the fight against the dam, we have been concentrating some time on many other projects.

In early February 2007, Craig started looking into having some Mary River Turtle plush toys made to help raise the profile of this unique threatened species and also raise funds for us. Several months and prototypes later, we were very happy with the product and the Management Committee gave approval for production. Then in October, the vendor increased the minimum purchase order from 600 to 2400 pieces which made the toys inaccessible for us, being such a young organisation. Realising we were going to miss the Xmas market we decided to persist with the idea and found another reputable company to continue with the order. The toys are now in production and will hopefully be available by May. Below is a sneak-peek at what to expect.



This is the pattern that was approved...the colour scheme will obviously be a little different. The toys have an eight page 'hang tag' explaining the natural history and conservation status of the turtle. All profits from the sale of these toys will go back into AFTCRA Inc. to help us to achieve our conservation goals. The recommended retail price is \$20.00AU.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Barton Latta for his assistance, last November, with the design of an e-card for one of our members. The card was designed as a Xmas card and a \$1000 donation was made to AFTCRA Inc. on behalf of the member's work clients. Thanks Dorian, for your ingenuity and generosity, once again!

In May 2007, we applied for a Demonstrators Permit from Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. Upon approval, we were able to visit many Queensland venues with 'Travis' the famous Mary River Turtle. Travis has been an invaluable ambassador for his species and as he was hatched into captivity in the pet industry 41 years ago, he is very accepting of his human family and friends.

Travis is also helping us to raise the profile of the Mary River Turtle and has attended many functions so everyone can appreciate how unique and special they really are. What other Australian species was discovered in a Pet Shop? Travis has met Senators Bob Brown & Andrew Bartlett as well as attended a meeting with Federal Minister for The Environment Peter Garrett, in March of this year. He has also appeared in several publications and news articles. Travis actually seems to relish the attention.



Travis with Senators Bob Brown, Andrew Bartlett and Minister for the Environment, Peter Garrett.

We have been able to take Travis to Brisbane to meet Brisbane locals and explain the true, expected impacts the Traveston dam will have on the threatened species of the Mary River. We have been met with great enthusiasm and many guests were impressed by Travis' size and temperament. We only had one objection from a visitor that believed having Travis out of water was cruel. She was easily convinced that turtles enjoy an opportunity to 'dry out' occasionally, that the pro's of educating the general public using live animals, far outweigh the con's and that Travis is comfortable around crowds, having spent his entire life in human care.

Last November, Craig had the opportunity to travel up north and assist James Cook University with their Irwin's Turtle (*Elseya irwini*) field work, mainly in the Bowen and Broken Rivers. Craig's diving in Croc' country always makes me incredibly nervous but it doesn't seem to curb his enthusiasm in any way! After diving many sites, new and proven in JCU's experiences, the trip was very successful with Craig increasing the known compliment of Irwin's turtle males and juveniles by about 60%. Craig also spent several days with the JCU turtle team looking for new sites that Irwin's Turtle had never been seen in before. It was concluded that these sites, although containing perfect habitat for the species, were not within the Irwin's turtle range. Interestingly, there were no *Elseya* species present in these areas.

For everyone not familiar with Irwin's turtle, this species was discovered in 1990 by Steve and Bob Irwin when they were on a fishing trip. The Irwin's contacted John Cann and sent him photos to confirm it was actually a different species to *Elseya dentata* (the Northern Snapping turtle). The Snapping turtle complex has since been more closely investigated and Irwin's Turtle was only described by John in 1997.

Craig was also fortunate enough to dive in a tributary of the Johnstone River and find the Johnstone River Turtle (*Elseya sterlingi*). *E. sterlingi* is another interesting species that was thought to be the Northern Snapping turtle until recently. Richard Wells only described this species in 2007.



Irwin's Turtle *Elseya irwini*



Johnstone River Turtle *Elseya sterlingi*

Now that Craig has purchased an underwater camera, we hope to be able to provide many more photos of turtles, in-situ. Underwater photography is a whole new ball game though, so we'll see how we go.

By far, the most time consuming task we have undertaken since the last newsletter was the assessment of (and submission for) the Traveston Crossing Dam Environmental Impact Statement (TCDEIS). The Traveston Crossing dam is the dam that threatens the future of the Mary River Turtle, *Elusor macrurus*, in the wild. As mentioned in our last newsletter, we were responsible for collecting the data for the turtle component of the fauna survey for the EIS. The most compelling conclusion drawn from the data was that "The Mary River within the proposed inundation area, together with the contiguous reach below Traveston Crossing contains substantially greater habitat values specific to Mary River Turtle than all other localities surveyed, based on the abundance of individuals in this area." (Ecotone Environmental Services, 2007)

The TCDEIS was compiled by the consultancy firm, Sinclair Knight Mertz, for the proponent of the dam, Queensland Water Infrastructure Pty Ltd. This 3600 page document (including the technical reports) was mind-blowing to say the least. We had to thoroughly scrutinise the document as AFTCRA Inc. was mentioned several times and we were not happy with the context of most of the references which implied we agreed with all of the proposed mitigation strategies for turtles. There were 7 volumes in total, weighing around 15 kilograms. Our submission against the dam was intended to be 4 pages but ended up being 18 pages including photographs.



This photo shows 3 of the 7 volumes plus a handful of the technical reports. The TCDEIS was provided for free on DVD/CD but cost \$150 if you requested a hard-copy. Interestingly, the CD and hard-copies were different versions and this made it all the more difficult to assess.

Several sleepless nights and twenty hour days led to the completion of our submission by the deadline on 14th January 2008. The submission was sent to the Queensland Coordinator-General, the head of the Department of Infrastructure and Planning. After receiving over 11,000 submissions against the dam, the Coordinator-General has

ordered the proponent to produce a supplementary EIS (SEIS) to address the areas that were lacking or misleading in the original document. The next step is for the Supplementary EIS to be sent to Federal Minister for the Environment, Mr. Peter Garrett, for approval or denial. It is crucial for anyone concerned about the dam to write to Minister Garrett to express these concerns. The more letters and the more evidence about the impact of the dam to the turtles and other threatened species, that he receives, the more likely it will be that he will not approve the project. He will have 30 business days to make a decision, once he receives the SEIS, which is expected to be sent to him by July.

If anyone is interested in learning more about this EIS and AFTCRA Inc's involvement with it, we would be happy to email or send a copy of our submission and the relevant technical report.

In September 2007, the 10th Annual River Symposium and Environmental Flows Conference was held in Brisbane. Several international delegates expressed interest in the Mary River dam issue and travelled to the area to see what all the fuss was about. After learning about the ecological significance of the Mary River and its endemic species, the delegates are now in full support of the campaign against the Traveston Crossing dam. The delegates also had an opportunity to meet 'Travis' and his friend the Southern Snapping Turtle, *Elseya albagula*, the other threatened turtle species from the Mary river system.

**International delegates
from left to right: Roberto
Epple from the European
Rivers Network, France,
Patrick McCully - Executive
Director of the International
Rivers Network, USA, and
Alistair Driver - National
Conservation Manager of
the UK Environment
Agency.**



Bernard Devaux, the founder of the French turtle and tortoise conservation organisation, SOPTOM, has donated another \$500AU and pledged \$1000 Euro per year towards the dam campaign and any associated legal costs. Thanks again Bernard!

In October and November last year, Craig and I ran some turtle identification workshops for some of the local Mary River councils. These workshops were very successful and free of charge to the participants and raised \$1,130.00 for AFTCRA Inc.

Last weekend, I attended the second Macarthur Herpetological Society Show. It was a great success, with over 2000 people attending the one day event. Thanks to Peter Johnson and the Mac. Herps team, we were able to have a stall there for free and have been pledged another donation of prize money and a small percentage of profits from the show. Thanks again to Peter and the Mac. Herps crew for your continued support!

The main aim for us at the show was to express our concerns about the urgency to write to the federal minister regarding the Traveston Crossing Dam and to sell some of our merchandise. We encouraged many people to write to the Minister using the Australian Conservation Foundation's form letter, available on their website. The address for writing a letter is –

http://www.acfonline.org.au/default.asp?section_id=249

If you would like to help with this campaign, all you have to do is fill out the form and the ACF will print and mail it for you! It would be of great assistance if you could also follow the prompts and forward the link to your friends and family.



Myself and my father, Bob Scott, who assisted me with the stall at the Macarthur Herpetological Society Show, that was provided free of charge. (Photo- by Hix)

In October 2007, Dr David Vella, of Sydney, kindly offered to provide a 10% discount off specialist reptile veterinary services to all of our members. Thanks David, this has greatly improved our membership incentives program, which we are always trying to add new and exciting offers to.

Lastly, in January, we hosted one of our members, Kane Leclere, for one week's work experience. Kane dived in the Mary River with Craig to appreciate how difficult field work can be and was able to assist us with data collection. Thanks for your help Kane; we hope you had a good time!

Upcoming events include more turtle workshops with Greening Australia in Rockhampton, and another stall at the Annual Reptile and Frog Expo, in Sydney, next month.

If you feel you can provide any assistance with any of our projects, we would love to hear from you. We need more general members so please spread the word!

At this point, I have to thank Craig for his assistance with compiling this newsletter...Thanks Craig!

I will endeavour to produce another newsletter in the near future, until then please take care and bye for now!

Warm regards,

Gabrielle Latta
Treasurer – AFTCRA Inc.