Saving Murray River turtles from extinction

Dr Ricky Spencer from the School of Science and Health is leading a multidisciplinary team* to identify the cause and manage the decline of turtles in the Murray River. This research is funded through the Australian Research Council’s Linkage Projects program.

‘Turtles are a major ecological component of the Murray-Darling river system, but there is an alarming decline in the number of turtles, which can have dire consequences for water quality, biodiversity and the overall health of the river system’ explains Dr Spencer. ‘Murray River turtles were listed as threatened in Victoria and their decline is now obvious, with 93 per cent of nests on the Murray River destroyed by foxes. As a result, turtles in the Murray River are at risk of extinction, with more than 70 per cent less turtles than 40 years ago. This issue also has cultural significance for the indigenous people of the Yorta Yorta Nation (YYN) who have connections to turtles. Our research will assess the status of the turtle population, our ability to prevent predation of eggs by foxes, determine the impact of dams on the diversity of the turtles and determine the feeding habits and ecosystem of each turtle species.’

The research will involve establishing seven sampling sites across three regions of the Murray River to ensure data is collected from a range of habitats. At each region, capture-mark-recapture turtle programs will be conducted over the three years of the project for quantitative modelling. The partnership with YYN integrates indigenous knowledge and cross cultural communication and training.

The Murray River affects the livelihood of millions of Australians in both urban and rural areas, with the agricultural products irrigated by water from these rivers consumed by people every day. The research will provide information on the river’s health and biodiversity, as well as the mechanisms on how to improve it.

Project Title: Extinction of turtles in the River Murray: Consequences and Solutions
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