

Another reason for the western swamp tortoise to smile

September 26 2018, by Cahli Samata



Western swamp tortoise, Adelaide Zoo. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

There were smiles all round, from people and tortoises alike, at the

release of 12 western swamp tortoises into Ellenbrook Nature Reserve.

I defy anyone to look at a western swamp tortoise's smile and not smile back.

But behind their eternally cheery grins, these little reptiles hide a lot of hardship.

At one point, things got so rough that they were [actually thought to be extinct](#). At their worst population crash, it was estimated that only 20 to 30 individuals were left in the wild.

Thankfully, Perth Zoo, the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) and the WA community all pulled together to help save the species—most recently, releasing 12 captive bred tortoises into Ellenbrook Nature Reserve.

But how did these animals get in such dire straits in the first place?

Left high and dry

Western swamp tortoises are very picky about their habitat. They like ephemeral wetlands, which are wetlands that are wet in winter and spring, then dry up in the summer. It's a strange choice—wetter than usual for a tortoise, drier than usual for a turtle.

They took advantage of this environment because, at the time, nothing else was using it. But a combination of land clearing, reduced rainfall and climate change means this type of habitat is getting harder to find.

It doesn't help that foxes have been snacking on them either.

But before the tortoises were wiped out completely, Perth Zoo got busy

getting the turtles to ... well, 'get busy'. Their [breeding program](#) has been a great success, with more than 700 tortoises bred and released into the wild.

(Let's not forget the amazing efforts in management, habitat revegetation and fundraising from DBCA and the [Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise group](#) either.)

The latest tortoises released by Perth Zoo have another extra special job to do. They're part of a research release, which will help us help them in the future.

A tortoise transmission

The released tortoises at Ellenbrook Nature Reserve were fitted with two trackers. The first was a basic radio transmitter so that Perth Zoo could find the tortoises again after they disappeared under the murky clay waters. The second was a datalogger.

The datalogger will record information like temperature, depths and humidity to paint a picture of their natural habitat.

This information will then be used in a few different ways. Researchers will use it to make a more natural experience for their captive tortoises, as zoo animals fare better in conditions that closely mimic their wild habitat.

The data will also be used to help researchers find new habitat for the tortoises. With only two areas left and threats of [climate change](#), the more [habitat](#) we can find for these critters, the better.

Stick your neck out

Members of the WA community who've helped tortoise recovery efforts were rewarded with an up-close encounter at the release.

There were beaming faces everywhere you looked and adoring coos as people got to have a quick [tortoise](#) 'cuddle' before sending them off to their new home.

You could really feel the love, and it's this love and support from the WA community that has gone a long way in helping the species towards recovery.

You can help continue their recovery too. You can submit a [donation for conservation](#) to Perth Zoo, [become a member of the Friends of the Western Swamp Tortoise](#) or [just do your bit to mitigate climate change](#).

Together, we can make sure we never lose these bright smiling faces from the world.

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