

A rare experience in the wild

A RECOVERY program for one of the world's rarest animals has entered a new phase with 10 of the creatures being released into their natural habitat.

The animal is the western swamp tortoise, the most endangered tortoise on earth.

The release into Twin Swamps Nature Reserve at Bullsbrook north of Perth, is the culmination of a cooperative effort to bring the species back from the brink of extinction.

The project has been carried out by researchers from CALM, the University of Western Australia, Perth Zoo and Curtin University.

The team has been supported by the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Australian Nature Conservation Agency and the Water Authority of Western Australia.

A new recovery plan for the tortoise also has been released. The plan was coordinated by CALM's Threatened Species and Communities Unit - WATSCU.

WATSCU Director Andrew Burgidge, who has been associated with research into the animal for 30 years, said only about 35 of the tortoises still survived in the two swamps compared with about 130



CALM's Director of the Western Australian Threatened Species and Communities Unit Dr Andrew Burgidge prepares to release a western swamp tortoise at Twin Swamps. With him is UWA biologist Dr Gerald Kuchling, ready with tracking equipment. Photo by Rod Taylor, courtesy of The West Australian

in the 1960s.

Clearing in the Swan Valley between Pearce and Guildford had destroyed most of the animal's habitat. Predators, particularly foxes, were another factor in its near extinction.

However, a breeding program involving Perth Zoo, CALM's WA Wildlife Research Centre at Woodvale and UWA's

Zoology Department, has resulted in 100 western swamp tortoises being raised in captivity.

To combat predators, CALM's Perth District built fox-proof fences around Twin Swamps and another nature reserve at Ellen Brook.

The recovery team also had to deal with the problem of the nature reserves

drying up too early in spring. The Water Authority, a major sponsor of the recovery mission, installed a bore and now swamp water levels can be maintained until December.

The new recovery plan focuses on five key strategies. These are:

- ◆ To manage the tortoises' habitat in the two nature reserves;

- ◆ Monitor tortoise populations;
- ◆ Continue the captive breeding program at Perth Zoo;
- ◆ Continue to re-introduce the tortoises in the two swamps; and
- ◆ Raise funds for the recovery plan and provide educational and other information about the species and its recovery.

The recovery mission is part of the need to conserve Western Australia's biological diversity for future generations.

Dr Burgidge said the western swamp tortoise project has shown clearly that if habitat can be maintained and predators controlled, it is possible to save species from extinction.

