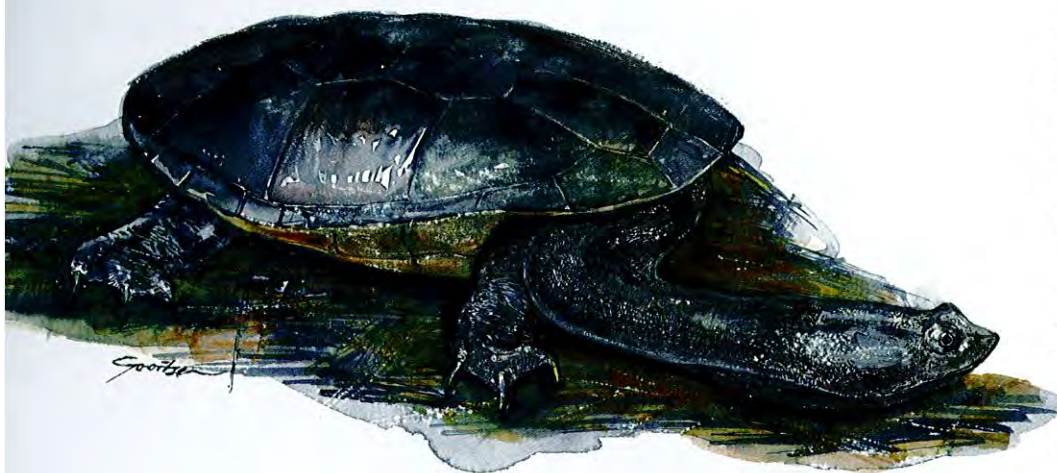


urban antics

by John Hunter



Water 'bout it

There was, until recently, a distinct lack of surface water in a lot of our urban lake and swamp areas. Depending who you talk to, it's because of the seasonally dry weather, the increase in the number of groundwater bores, the rates that groundwater is abstracted from aquifers, the decrease in surface water run-off, climate change or a combination.

Another explanation for the noticeable reduction in healthy waterways is the increase in urbanisation of Perth city. In other words, more people, buildings, vehicles, industry, paved surfaces and a resulting decrease in native vegetation surrounding wetlands. This increases the surface water run-off and drainage water that flows to the ocean.

You might think, however, it's rather strange that while the amount of water on the planet and in the atmosphere is still the same as it always has been, it appears that at the moment it is ... somewhere else ... 'gone to lunch' ... 'missing in action'.

In truth, the natural hydrological cycle of evaporation/transpiration into atmospheric clouds then back to Earth by rainfall has changed patterns. That dynamic process is likely to keep changing, and maybe it will rain here again like it used to ... sooner, or later.

Not too long ago the waterways and wetlands of the suburbs contained quite a number of long-necked or oblong tortoises (*Chelodina oblonga*), rakali or water rats (*Hydromys chrysogaster*) and the many other types and numbers of aquatic creatures on which they were dependent for food. These days, the water of life and its dependent fauna are, in some places, scarce.

Some 20 years ago it was possible to see hundreds of long-necked turtles in many urban waterways. In late spring each year, the first real hot days would see a procession as the reptiles left the sanctity of their domain to seek nest sites in nearby open spaces and domestic gardens. In particular, the Perry and Jualbup lakes were well stocked with the animals. To a lesser degree, and for those who braved dark nights on slippery shoreline embankments,

rakali could be spotted in Claremont at Butlers Lake and in Herdsman Lake Regional Park and associated drainage channels. Today, there is the added concern of predation by cats, dogs and foxes which has seen water rats, tortoises, frogs and other wetland species numbers decline.

Since 2006, it has become most evident that the Gngangara Mound groundwater system, which supplies 60 per cent of Perth's water requirements, is at risk. Some 80 per cent of lakes once connected to aquifers in the mound were dry this past summer.

The future improvement and protection of the mound will be reliant on current intergovernmental recommendations to reduce water abstraction, increase groundwater recharge and the recharge of specific waterways with treated waste and storm water, increase ecological refuges, and control predators. The Department of Environment and Conservation is already working to replant the existing local Gngangara pine plantation with native vegetation species.

In the meantime, it's up to every citizen and establishment to be mindful of water wastage in all its forms, even in winter.

Everyone is encouraged to visit their urban parks and picnic places, even during winter. Not only can you see firsthand the beauty of season differences but you can take a form of ownership by observing and reporting on fauna movements and ecological changes. Water 'bout it?

DID YOU KNOW?

- To report sightings and to enquire about programs try googling 'Turtle Watch WA'. Data can also be entered on the ClimateWatch website at www.climatewatch.org.au.
- Drainage and treated waste water is still being pumped into the ocean, as research continues into the risks of supplementing Perth's wetlands, such as Perry Lakes, with drainage and treated water.
- Predicted rainfall decline, together with escalating groundwater use and economic growth, will further increase demands on Perth's groundwater system.

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