



Nest protection for vulnerable turtles

Additional funding leads to significant increase in hatching rates

For over a decade, Fitzroy Basin Association Inc. (FBA) and Greening Australia have teamed together to protect iconic Fitzroy River Turtles from predation. However, by securing corporate partners to complement funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Programme, the two organisations have exponentially increased their nest protection efforts over the past two years.

FBA Senior Project Officer Cassandra Tracey said Fitzroy River Turtles are informally known as 'bum-breathing' turtles because of their unusual ability to absorb oxygen through their bottom, called a cloaca, as well as through their lungs.

“*Fitzroy River Turtles are incredibly unique and are found only in the Fitzroy and Dawson rivers, in the Fitzroy Basin,” she said. “They are listed as vulnerable under both Commonwealth and Queensland legislation, and their main threat is through egg predation. Research suggests over 90 per cent of nests are predated, mostly by pest animals.”*

For over 10 years, FBA has worked in partnership with Greening Australia to protect the turtle nests. For the past two breeding seasons, FBA and Greening Australia have also secured corporate partnerships by tapping into environmental offset funding to enhance their nest protection efforts. Australia Pacific LNG supported the 2015–2016 season, and Santos GLNG were involved in the 2016–2017 season.

Greening Australia Field Officer Kimberly Robinson said the Fitzroy River Turtle breeding season runs from August to January each year. “The turtles nest on shallow sandy or loamy riverbanks along the Fitzroy River upstream of Rockhampton city and can lay 16-20 eggs at a time, with up to two clutches laid during a season per breeding turtle,” she said.

“Once we find the nest, we use mesh to protect the nest sites, which stops predators from digging up the nests, while allowing the hatchlings to scramble through when they are born. Eggs are incubated for 46 days, so it is a significant task to find, monitor and protect numerous nests at different sites along the Fitzroy River.”



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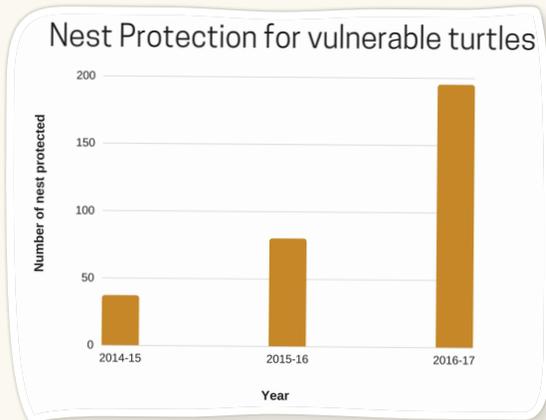
A Fitzroy River Turtle nest on the banks of the Fitzroy River.



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Protected numbers of Fitzroy River Turtle nests have almost quadrupled since offset funding became available by Australia Pacific LNG and Santos GLNG.



Ms Robinson said nest protection was conducted just three days a week during the 2014–2015 breeding season. However, by tapping into offset funding through corporate partners in 2015 and 2016, nest protection efforts were doubled to six days each week, which has led to a significant increase in the number of nests able to be protected.

“We’re proud to say we almost tripled that figure in the 2016-2017 season protecting 195 nests,” Ms Robinson said.

Mrs Tracey said support from both the Australian Government’s National Landcare Programme and the complementary corporate partnerships were instrumental to the nest protection program’s ongoing success.

“We’ve protected record numbers of nests each year for the past two breeding seasons, and that was made possible through the financial offsets support of Australia Pacific LNG and Santos GLNG,” Mrs Tracey said.

“We’ve been able to more than double our nest protection efforts year on year since 2014-2015, and all the organisations involved in the project are incredibly proud of this significant achievement.

“The Fitzroy River Turtle nest protection program is a strong example of the positive outcomes that can result from securing complementary corporate partnerships. Through them, we’ve been able to deliver outstanding results for this vulnerable species, and have helped secure a brighter future for this unusual and iconic turtle.”



Freshly-laid Fitzroy River Turtle nests are checked prior to installing nest protection mesh



Greening Australia’s Kimberly Robinson and FBA’s Cassandra Tracey at a Fitzroy River Turtle nest protection site.



Covering turtle nests with mesh prevents predators from preying on Fitzroy River Turtle eggs yet allows hatchlings to emerge easily.



Fitzroy River Turtle hatchlings are tiny, about the size of a fifty cent piece, and grow to about 25 centimetres in length as an adult.