

Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Gulf snapping turtle

Elseya lavarackorum

Conservation status

Australia: Endangered

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Northern Territory: Least Concern

Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976

Description

The Gulf Snapping Turtle is a medium- to large-sized short-necked turtle, growing to about 35 cm long. The carapace is brown to almost black, while the plastron is generally a pale yellow to light brown colour; though the shell colouration can be hidden by a layer of brown residue that accumulates on its surface. The feet of juveniles are often suffused with pink, which fades as they get older.

The species is similar to the more widespread and common Northern Snapping Turtle *Elseya dentata*, but can be distinguished by an undulating (rather than straight) suture between the humeral and pectoral shields of the plastron.

Distribution

The distribution of the Gulf Snapping Turtle is restricted to rivers draining into the Gulf of Carpentaria¹. In the Northern Territory (NT), this includes the Calvert to the Nicholson River systems².

NT conservation reserves where reported: None.

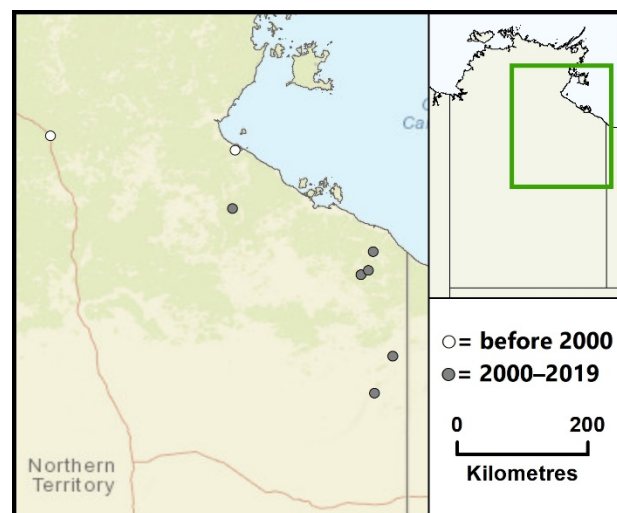


Credit: S. Zozaya

Ecology and life-history

The Gulf Snapping Turtle occurs in deep pools in the upper catchments of permanently flowing spring-fed river systems, particularly in areas with intact riparian vegetation³. The presence of favoured food plants, such as the Cluster Fig *Ficus racemosa* and *Pandanus aquaticus*, influences the suitability of water pools for this species³.

The diet of the Gulf Snapping Turtle mainly comprises leaves, fruits, flowers, bark and roots of *Pandanus*. Juveniles may eat more animal material, mostly insect larvae.



Caption: Known localities of the Gulf Snapping Turtle in the NT (nrmmaps.nt.gov.au)

Nesting occurs in the dry Season. Clutches comprise between 6 and 9 eggs, which are buried in a nest dug into the soil near the water's edge.

Threatening processes

Degradation of riparian habitat by livestock and feral ungulates, inappropriate fire regimes and/or invasive weeds is a significant threat to the Gulf Snapping Turtle. The other primary threat to the species is predation of eggs by feral Pigs *Sus scrofa*³.

A small number of Gulf Snapping Turtles are killed when they drown in crab and prawn traps set by recreational fishers. The illegal use of gillnets can also result in mortality of Gulf Snapping Turtles.

Anthropogenic climate may prove to be a long-term threat to the Gulf Snapping Turtle. Abnormally high temperatures are known to kill embryos in nests that have greater exposure to the sun. Increasing global temperatures could therefore reduce breeding success.

Conservation objectives and management

The main research priority for the Gulf Snapping Turtle in the NT is to better clarify its status, including an assessment of distribution, abundance, habitat requirement and threats; and to establish a monitoring program.

References

- ¹ Georges, A., Adams, M., 1996. Electrophoretic delineation of species boundaries within the short-necked freshwater turtles of Australia (Testudines: Chelidae). *Zool. J. Linnean Soc.* 118, 241–260.
- ² Cann, J., 1998. Australian freshwater turtles. Beaumont, Singapore.
- ³ Freeman, A., Thomson, S., Cann, J. 2014. *Elseya lavarackorum* (White and Archer 1994) – Gulf Snapping Turtle, Gulf Snapper, Riversleigh Snapping Turtle, Lavarack's Turtle, in: Rhodin, A.G.J., Pritchard, P.C.H., van Dijk, P.P., Saumure, R.A., Buhlmann, K.A., Iverson, J.B., Mittermeier, R.A. (Eds.). *Conservation Biology of Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises: A Compilation Project of the IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group*. Chelonian Research Monographs 5(7):082.1–10