

The National **Weekender**

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A photograph of a man in a grey cap and shorts holding a large pig-nosed turtle in a forest. Another man in a blue shirt is visible in the background. The text 'Saving the pig-nosed turtle' is overlaid in large blue letters.

Saving the pig-nosed turtle

■ A pig-nosed turtle helpless in the hands of a local on Banana Island in Gulf province. Today, they are found only in the southern-flowing rivers of PNG, and in some of the major rivers of the Northern Territory in Australia. In PNG, the reptile is now the focus of a collaborative research project supported by the University of Canberra, Oil Search (PNG) Limited, and the conservation organization World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). – Photo courtesy of WWF. – Cover Story Page 2

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LYDIA KAIA and DENNIS BADI of WWF report on efforts to preserve the pig-nosed turtle for future generations

MEET Piggy - a small cartoon turtle who researchers hope will help turn around a decline in the numbers of the last survivors of a 40-million-year-old family.

Piggy is a pig-nosed turtle, or more formally, *Carettochelys insculpta*. Pig-nosed turtles are the last surviving members of the *Carettochelyidae* scientific family of creatures. Today, they are found only in the southern-flowing rivers of New Guinea, and in some of the major rivers of the Northern Territory in Australia. It's a far cry from the *Carettochelyidae* family's range 40 million years ago, which fossil evidence suggests included Asia, Europe and North America.

Listed as vulnerable in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, the pig-nosed turtle in Papua New Guinea is now the focus of a collaborative research project supported by the University of Canberra, Oil Search (PNG) Limited, and the conservation organization World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). The project is working with communities along Kikori River in the Gulf Province, to gather strategic data on the nesting biology of the turtle, and the harvesting of turtles and their eggs. It also aims to raise awareness of the turtle's significance, and to encourage discussion of the need for sustainable harvesting and protection.

Piggy the cartoon turtle stars in a new book the project has produced and distributed to around 5000 school children in the region - researcher Carla Eisemberg says Piggy introduces children to the pig-nosed turtle and its life cycle in an entertaining way.

"The book uses games and number puzzles to underline the importance of sustainable fishing and hunting practices to preserve turtles for future generations, because over-harvesting is a very real danger," Ms Eisemberg says.

"We know that traditionally the pig-nosed turtles have been an important part of local people's diet, and that hunting and fishing for turtles is part of the culture. But the pressure on the turtle population seems to be increasing - people aren't just harvesting them for their own use, but for sale in the markets. If that pressure becomes too intense, there's a real risk that the turtles could be wiped out in this region."

The star of the PNG five-toea coin, the turtle's pig-like snout makes it instantly recognizable. Above water, Piggy and her real-life counterparts use their noses for breathing, but underwater, the nose becomes a detection device.

The turtle's nose is not its only unusual feature. Its front limbs take the form of flippers, like marine turtles. These flippers have two claws on the outer side, which the turtle uses to hold food such as fruits, crabs and crustaceans while eating. The claws also enable the turtle to hold on to vegetation while resting.

Weighing as much as 25 kilograms, the Kikori pig-nosed turtles are significantly larger than their Australian cousins. Female turtles lay eggs once or twice every two years, at

Tuum Est: A proud motto for a fine school



Geoff Pope with 1965 class. Ron Elias is in back row, Bernard Narakobi at Geoff's right hand.



night on a dry sandy bank on the river's edge. Digging a small hole, each breeding female will deposit between 13 and 36 eggs. About the size and shape of a ping-pong ball. The eggs incubate in the nest around two months before hatching. The sex of the hatchlings depends on the temperature - if the sandbanks are warm or hot, there will be more females; if cooler, there will be more males.

The three-month nesting season, during the September to February dry season, is a hazardous time for turtles. The mangrove lizard is devastatingly efficient when it comes to finding newly-laid turtle eggs. Similarly, the salt and freshwater crocodiles that inhabit the Kikori River and delta prey on turtles. Flooding is another problem - if the river floods early and inundates the nest, the eggs won't hatch if submerged for more than four days. To make matters worse, the nesting season is when turtles are mostly likely to be hunted by people.

The international pet industry has always been a problem for the pig-nosed turtle - its unique appearance makes it popular with collectors, and in the past unsustainable egg collection has occurred. A recent CITES listing (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) under Appendix II may provide more protection.

In the Kikori region, the turtle is hunted primarily for food, for its meat and eggs. Local communities watch for groups of females laying their eggs on riverbanks. Eisemberg says that in recent times, some hunters have been taking larger numbers of breeding females and taking entire clutches of eggs, leaving none to hatch.

"In the Kikori area, people seem to have forgotten their traditional resource management practices and so they're now major threats to the survival of pig-nosed turtles. The wisdom that used to be passed from one generation to the next is being lost," she says. Gathering more information about turtle populations in the wild will help conservation. Eisemberg says the data will help scientists understand how many turtles there are, and how often and how successfully they are breeding.

"That in turn gives us a better basis for sitting down with local villagers to work out what's a sustainable harvest, and what's a concern."

Veraibari Ward Councillor Alex Miuari praised the project's efforts to reach out to the younger generation, and its sustainable harvest message. "We know it's important to preserve the pig-nosed turtle for the future generations, by not taking every egg for consumption, but leave some to hatch to multiply the turtle population."

As well as producing the book introducing local children to Piggy the turtle, the project has worked with a group of senior school students, training them to help with scientific survey and monitoring work, use computers, and involve them in radio programmes made with the help of the local NGO, Community Development Initiative.

"Their Nature Talk programme will be broadcast in Tok Pisin, Motu and English and has generated a lot of public interest in Kikori," Eisemberg said.

WWF's PNG representative Iain Carr said the project was an important one, and acknowledged the financial and logistical support provided by Oil Search Ltd.

"The company and its joint venture partners recognize that the social and economic impact of their operations can extend well beyond a project area," Mr Carr said.

"For example, when development attracts more people to an area, this can have unintended effects on wildlife, such as the pig-nosed turtle. Oil Search's partnerships with WWF and with universities to mitigate these potential impacts are really breaking new ground."

WWF species officer Felix Kinginapi has worked on the turtle research with Carla Eisemberg - he says it's difficult to predict or measure the eventual impact. "But most certainly, there has been a shift in the community response," he says.

Ms Eisemberg says that although her field work with the project will finish in April, she hopes the students and the communities she has worked with will now take over, continuing efforts to preserve pig-nosed turtles for future generations.

"The pig-nosed turtle is so important to the people of the Kikori region. They are the ones who can really help to work out how we can strike a balance between people's needs, and making sure turtles survive for the future. Our research and awareness work is intended to help with that," she said.

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