



Wheezer  
the lungfish  
says, "Save the  
Mary River!"

# Dam the Mary River? Save the Mary River!

## MEDIA RELEASE August 14 2006

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### Save the Mary River Coordinating Group

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## Paradise dam not Paradise

The Beattie Government announced yesterday that it will provide an additional \$50 000 a year for the next five years for the Southern Snapping Turtle (*Elseya albagula*) turtle hatchery at the Paradise Dam on the Burnett River, Bundaberg. The Government has announced previously that the turtle stocks of the Mary River, threatened by the proposed Traveston Dam, will be sustained by a similar turtle hatchery.

What the Premier has not disclosed to the public is the failure of the Paradise Dam hatchery to produce hatchlings. The hatchery was only completed earlier this year and its success at producing turtles for release is yet to be determined because any eggs placed into the hatchery this year are not expected to hatch for around 5 months. Hence, although some nest are currently incubating no turtle hatchlings have yet been born as a result of wild-caught females nesting in the man-made ponds and sand banks of the Paradise Dam hatchery. Five years worth of funding is insignificant in proving whether this approach will work to conserve and rehabilitate turtle populations especially with regard to the 20 year generational cycle of the turtle. For example, no one has looked at the survivorship of hatchlings or young turtles in the river.

To be successful hatcheries must do more than release turtles into the wild. For a hatchery program to work effectively there must be suitable riverine habitat to release hatchlings into. With the building of dams comes a permanent change in the turtle's habitat through fluctuations in water levels and water flows both in the ponded area of the dam and downstream areas. The building of dam walls effectively divides the population, possibly causing a loss of diversity. Additionally, "traditional" nesting banks, correctly oxygenated water and food sources are destroyed.

How can this unproven technology be used to prevent the extinction of the Mary River Turtle (*Elusor macrurus*) if the Traveston Dam is built? The Mary River Turtle, listed under State, Federal and International legislation as endangered, is only found in the Mary River drainage. It is evolutionarily important as it represents a very old lineage of turtles that has all but disappeared from the evolutionary history of Australia. Also of interest is the fact that these two species, the Southern Snapping Turtle and the Mary River Turtle, are part of a unique group of turtles in the world that are capable of cloacal breathing, making them even more vulnerable to the effects of the poor water quality in dams.

Peter Beattie's hatchery experiments for turtles are yet to prove that he is not an environmental vandal. What will happen after five years? If there is no subsequent protection of eggs and hatchlings, and predators, water quality or riparian zones are not managed we will be back to where we started. If the species can no longer breed in the wild because of the effects of the dam, then they will still not be breeding in 20 years. In other words, a hatchery program is nothing more than a temporary band aid solution.

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