



AQUATIC LANDS HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN — Species Spotlight

Western Pond Turtle — *Actinemys marmorata*

Protection status: *Endangered listing in Washington state and a Federal Species of Concern*

Within Washington state, western pond turtles (also known as Pacific pond turtles) historically occurred in the Puget Trough ecoregion and in the Columbia River Gorge from sea level up to elevations nearing 1,000 feet (300 meters). Of the four known Washington populations, two occur naturally in ponds, lakes and small tributaries to the Columbia River in Skamania and Klickitat counties. The other two populations are captive-reared stocks released by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife in the Columbia Gorge and artificial ponds in Pierce County owned by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Life History

Western pond turtles have an estimated lifespan between 50 and 70 years, reaching reproductive maturity at about 10 years of age or at a carapace length of about 5 to 6 inches (135 to 140 mm). They nest from May to mid-July, with females burying 2 to 13 eggs in soils with little or no vegetative covering. Incubation times range between 3 and 4 months. These turtles usually nest within 300 feet (100 meters) or so of water, but



Western pond turtle. Photo: W. P. Leonard

occasionally will nest up to 1,300 feet (400 meters) from water. Similar to other turtles, the gender of the hatchlings depends on the temperature of the surrounding soils.

Western pond turtles are opportunistic feeders, foraging in or under water for invertebrates (insects, earthworms, mollusks, and crayfish), vertebrates (fish, tadpoles, amphibians), and carrion (small mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles).

Adults overwinter in the muddy bottoms of lakes or ponds, or in upland habitats adjacent to water bodies. Observation of juveniles in one study suggests they may also overwinter in the water.

Habitat Use

This aquatic turtle inhabits streams, ponds, lakes and both permanent and ephemeral wetlands. Pond turtles will migrate over land, and may slow their metabolism to help conserve water during hot or dry periods. Because they are *ectothermic*¹, pond turtles use floating vegetation, cattail mats, logs, rocks, mud flats, and sandbanks for basking in the sun. In large rivers, the pond turtle is located near the banks or in adjacent backwater habitats, where the current is relatively slow and emergent basking sites are abundant.

The habitat range of western pond turtles encompasses a variety of substrates, including rocks, boulders, cobbles, gravel, sand, mud, decaying vegetation, and combinations of these. Vegetative cover used by pond turtles includes areas with little or no emergent vegetation; areas with abundant emergent vegetation; sites with no emergent vegetation but with abundant submerged vegetation; and disturbed

¹ Regulating body temperature largely by exchanging heat with its surroundings.

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habitats where large mats of algae are the only aquatic vegetation present. Areas with dense shade generally lack basking sites and are unsuitable habitat for pond turtles.

Why are Western Pond Turtles included in the Aquatic Lands HCP?

The Aquatic Lands Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) addresses 29 species of animals that depend on submerged or intertidal lands for either all or a significant portion of their life history. Specific threats that warrant protection of the Western pond turtle include:

- Changes in habitat structure.
- Decreased water and sediment quality caused by stormwater discharges.
- Increased turbidity from vessel traffic and associated reductions of foraging efficiency.
- Alteration of shallow water habitats during construction and maintenance of structures.

The Aquatic Lands Habitat Conservation Plan

DNR is steward of more than 2.6 million acres of state-owned aquatic lands beneath Washington's navigable lakes, rivers, marine waters, and estuaries. DNR sustainably manages these aquatic lands on behalf of the people of the state—to protect fish and wildlife and to provide opportunities for commerce, navigation, and public access.

The increased demand for the use of aquatic lands can be harmful to aquatic habitats and species. To encourage a balanced approach to managing and protecting these lands, DNR is developing an Aquatic Lands **Habitat Conservation Plan** (HCP). The HCP will provide a framework for managing the aquatic lands under DNR's stewardship to ensure the continued health of our state's marine and fresh waters and the species that inhabit them.

Learn more

For more information about DNR's Aquatic Lands HCP and the other species that are covered in the plan, visit: www.dnr.wa.gov/aquaticHCP.

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