

**THE TERRESTRIAL ECOLOGY OF A FRESHWATER TURTLE,
CHELODINA LONGICOLLIS, IN BOODEREE NATIONAL PARK,
AUSTRALIA**

By

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A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION

Because this thesis is written as a series of chapters prepared for publication in peer-reviewed journals, several people other than myself contributed to the work, and they deserve acknowledgement. These include:

- Arthur Georges (Institute for Applied Ecology, University of Canberra), who as my primary supervisor provided his guidance and wisdom in all phases of the work, and was also instrumental in fund raising
- Brian Green (Institute for Applied Ecology, University of Canberra), who provided his technical expertise and advice in the design, implementation, sample analyses, and interpretation in doubly-labelled water
- Alicia Brinton (my wife), who willingly spent her time tramping around, paddling through, and snorkelling in the waterholes of Booderee National Park

These people are included as authors in the following chapters as well as the associated publications, in the order of their contribution to the work. However, despite the collaborative nature of this thesis, the work within is my own, and I received no additional assistance other than that which is stated above.

I as primary supervisor, agree with the above stated proportion of work undertaken for each of the published (or submitted) peer-reviewed manuscripts contributing to this thesis:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Arthur Georges". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'A'.

Prof Arthur Georges

December 2007

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I have always looked forward to acknowledging the contributions of others at the beginning of a work instead of at the end. A project of any magnitude reflects the collective contributions and support from several people and organizations. A doctoral thesis is certainly no exception. Recognizing those that helped to complete this process should not come as an afterthought, but should be at the forefront for the reader to encounter before they are skipping every second line and only looking at the pictures by the end.

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ABSTRACT

Most studies of wetlands tend to focus on the biotic and abiotic interactions within the aquatic habitat. Though wetlands and associated biota may appear to be somewhat isolated from the influence of the wider landscape, wetland habitats are critically linked with adjacent terrestrial habitats and other wetlands through the two-way flows of energy and nutrients and provision of structure. While an understanding of these inter-habitat linkages is breaking down the perceived boundaries between “aquatic” and “terrestrial” ecosystems, there is more limited knowledge on the ecology of wetland animals that must meet critical needs in both aquatic and terrestrial habitats at some time during their life or seasonal cycles. Here, I examine the terrestrial ecology of a freshwater turtle, the eastern long-necked turtle (*Chelodina longicollis*) in the temporally dynamic and heterogeneous landscape of Booderee national park in south-east Australia by 1) providing a description of terrestrial behaviours, 2) identifying the factors driving terrestrial behaviour and its functional significance, 3) examining factors that may limit or constrain terrestrial behaviour and 4) demonstrating how various terrestrial behaviours can factor prominently in the overall biology of a nominally aquatic animal.

Chelodina longicollis used terrestrial habitats for reasons other than nesting, including aestivation and movements between wetlands. Radio-telemetry of 60 turtles revealed that nearly 25 % of all locations were in terrestrial habitats up to 505 m from the wetland, where turtles remained for extended periods (up to 480 consecutive days) buried under sand and leaf litter in the forest. Individuals also maintained an association with a permanent lake and at least one temporary wetland within 1470 m, though some inter-wetland dispersal movements were much longer (5248 m). As a result of their associations with several wetlands and terrestrial aestivation sites, *C. longicollis* traversed large areas and long distances (13.8 ± 2.8 ha home range, 2608 ± 305 m moved), indicating that this species is highly vagile. In fact, a three-year capture-mark-recapture study conducted in 25 wetlands revealed that 33% of the population moved overland between wetlands. After scaling this rate to the number of generations elapsed during the study, *C. longicollis* moved between discrete water bodies at a rate of 88–132% per generation. This rate is not only high for freshwater turtles, but is among the highest rates of inter-patch movement for any vertebrate or invertebrate.

Chelodina longicollis demonstrated an impressive capacity for individual variation in nearly every aspect of its behaviour examined. Most of the variation in space use, movements, terrestrial aestivation and activity could be attributed to extrinsic local and landscape factors, seasonal influences and rainfall, whereas intrinsic attributes of the individual such as sex, body size, body condition and maturity status were less important.

Turtles increased movement distance and home range size in regions where inter-wetland distances were farther and with increasing wetland size. Individuals spent more time in terrestrial habitats with decreasing wetland hydroperiod and increasing distance to the nearest permanent lake. Overland movements between wetlands were correlated with rainfall, but the directionality of these movements and the frequency with which they occurred varied according to the prevalent rainfall patterns; movements were to permanent lakes during drought, but turtles returned to temporary wetlands *en masse* upon the return of heavy rainfall. However, deteriorating conditions in drying wetlands forced turtles to move even in the absence of rainfall. Captures at a terrestrial drift fence revealed that immature turtles as small as 72.3 mm plastron length may move overland between wetlands with similar frequency as larger adults. Taken together, these results suggest that *C. longicollis* behaviour is in part conditional or state-dependent (i.e., plastic) and shaped by the spatiotemporal variation and heterogeneity of the landscape.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of individual variation was the alternate responses to wetland drying. Turtles either aestivated in terrestrial habitats (for variable lengths of time), or moved to other wetlands. Movement to other wetlands was the near universal strategy when only a short distance from permanent lakes, but the proportion of individuals that aestivated terrestrially increased with distance to the nearest permanent lake. When long distances must be travelled, both behaviours were employed by turtles in the same wetland, suggesting that individuals differentially weigh the costs and benefits of residing terrestrially versus those of long-distance movement. I propose that diversity in response to wetland drying in the population is maintained by stochastic fluctuations in resource quality. The quality of temporary wetlands relative to permanent wetlands at our study site varies considerably and unpredictably with annual rainfall and with it the cost-benefit ratio of each strategy or tactic. Residency in or near temporary wetlands is more successful during wet periods due to production benefits (high growth, reproduction and increased body condition), but movement to permanent wetlands is more successful, or least costly, during dry periods due to the fitness benefits of increased survival and body condition.

I used the doubly-labelled water (DLW) method to provide the first estimates of water and energy costs of aestivation and overland movement for any freshwater turtle behaving naturally in the field. *Chelodina longicollis* remained hydrated while terrestrial with water flux rates (14.3–19.3 ml kg⁻¹ d⁻¹) on par with those of strictly terrestrial turtles, but field metabolic rate during aestivation (20.0–24.6 kJ kg⁻¹ d⁻¹) did not indicate substantial physiological specializations in metabolism during aestivation. Energy reserves, but not water, are predicted to limit survival in aestivation to an estimated 49–261 days, which is in

close agreement with the durations of natural aestivation. The energy costs of overland movement were 46–99 kJ (kg d)⁻¹, or 1.6–1.7 times more expensive than aestivation. When a wetland dries, a turtle that foregoes movement to other wetlands can free sufficient energy to fuel up to 134 days in aestivation. The increasing value of this energy “trade-off” with travel distance fits our behavioural observations of variance in response to wetland drying.

Taken together, this evidence indicates that terrestrial habitats provide more than just organic and structural inputs and filtering services and that nearby wetlands are important for reasons other than potential sources of occasional colonists to a population. Terrestrial habitats are used for aestivation in response to wetland drying and different wetlands are diverse in their functions of meeting the annual or life-cycle requirements of *C. longicollis* in temporally dynamic wetland systems. As overland movements between these various habitat types are in response to spatiotemporal variation in habitat quality and associated shifts in the fitness gradient between them, I suggest that terrestrial and different aquatic habitats in Booderee offer complementary resources contributing to regional carrying capacity and population persistence of the turtle population. Thus, important ecological processes regulating *C. longicollis* in a focal wetland should not be viewed as operating independently of other nearby wetlands and their adjacent terrestrial habitats. Collectively, these findings highlight the complex and dynamic associations between a population of freshwater turtles and the wider terrestrial and aquatic landscape, demonstrating that turtle populations and the factors that impact them can extend well beyond the boundaries of a focal wetland.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter I: General Introduction	1
<i>The merger of wetland and terrestrial ecology</i>	2
<i>Terrestrial ecology of freshwater turtles</i>	4
<i>The study system</i>	8
<i>Thesis aims and structure</i>	11
 Chapter II: Heterogeneous Wetland Complexes, Buffer Zones, and Travel Corridors: Landscape Management for Freshwater Reptiles	 14
<i>Abstract</i>	15
<i>Introduction</i>	16
<i>Methods</i>	
Study site	17
Data collection.....	18
Statistical analyses	19
<i>Results</i>	20
<i>Discussion</i>	24
Conservation and management implications.....	31
 Chapter III: Maintenance of variable responses for coping with wetland drying in freshwater turtles	 33
<i>Abstract</i>	34
<i>Introduction</i>	35
<i>Methods</i>	
Study site	37
Turtle capture.....	37
Radio-telemetry	37
Growth and body condition	38
Data analysis.....	39
<i>Results</i>	
Terrestrial behaviour and survival.....	40
Growth and body condition	45
<i>Discussion</i>	47

<i>Conclusions</i>	51
Chapter IV: Terrestrial activity, movements, and spatial ecology of an Australian freshwater turtle, <i>Chelodina longicollis</i>, in a temporally dynamic wetland system	54
<i>Abstract</i>	55
<i>Introduction</i>	56
<i>Methods</i>	
Study site	57
Radio-telemetry	58
Drift fence	59
Environmental variables	59
Statistical analyses	60
<i>Results</i>	
Movement and space use	61
Seasonal patterns	63
Drift fence	67
Prey and water variability	67
<i>Discussion</i>	71
Movements and space use	71
Terrestrial habitat use	73
Conclusions	75
Chapter V: Energy and water flux during terrestrial aestivation and overland movement in a freshwater turtle	76
<i>Abstract</i>	77
<i>Introduction</i>	78
<i>Material and methods</i>	
Study site	80
Doubly-labelled water study design	80
Field metabolic and water flux rate measurements	81
Isotope analyses	82
Calculations	83
Supplementary observations	84
Statistical analyses	84

<i>Results</i>	
Doubly-labelled water	86
Supplementary observations.....	89
<i>Discussion</i>	94
Terrestrial aestivation	94
Terrestrial movements	99
Future applications in freshwater turtles	102
Chapter VI: Temporal and spatial variation in landscape connectivity for an Australian freshwater turtle in a temporally dynamic wetland system	104
<i>Abstract</i>	105
<i>Introduction</i>	106
<i>Methods</i>	
Study site	108
Field data collection.....	108
Data handling and analyses	109
<i>Results</i>	111
<i>Discussion</i>	119
Implications for conservation and management.....	126
Chapter VII: Synopsis	128
<i>Variable responses and temporally dynamic wetlands</i>	129
<i>Linking behaviour with physiology</i>	131
<i>The characterization of freshwater turtle populations and implications for their management</i>	134
<i>Summary</i>	139
References	140

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Study site location and range map for <i>Chelodina longicollis</i>	7
Figure 1.2: Permanent wetlands of Booderee national park.....	9
Figure 1.3: Temporary wetlands of Booderee national park	10
Figure 2.1: Locations and movements of male and female turtles in the Blacks Waterhole system	22
Figure 2.2: Terrestrial habitat use in relation to distance from the wetland	23
Figure 2.3: A stratified approach to landscape management for wetland reptiles.....	30
Figure 3.1: Map of wetlands classified by hydroperiod and the alternate responses of turtles to wetland drying	41
Figure 3.2: Relationships between terrestrial behaviour, distance between permanent and temporary wetlands and hydroperiod	42
Figure 3.3: Relationship between variance in terrestrial behaviour and distance between temporary and permanent wetlands	44
Figure 3.4: Historic annual rainfall variation at the study site	49
Figure 3.5: Factors influencing aestivation and inter-wetland movement behaviour	52
Figure 4.1: Seasonal patterns of movement and space use in male and female turtles in relation to rainfall	65
Figure 4.2: Seasonal patterns of terrestrial habitat use in male and female turtles in relation to rainfall.....	66
Figure 4.3: Relationship between rainfall and overland movements of male, female and immature turtles captured at the drift fence	68
Figure 4.4: Monthly variation in prey abundance and water depth in temporary and permanent wetlands	70
Figure 5.1: Movements of translocated turtles compared to those moving overland between wetlands of their own accord.....	91
Figure 5.2: Energy expenditure for <i>Chelodina longicollis</i> during aestivation and overland movement	92
Figure 5.3: Environmental and shell temperature variation during terrestrial aestivation and while in wetlands in spring and summer	93
Figure 5.4: Survival times for aestivating turtles predicted from metabolism compared to observed durations of natural aestivation	97
Figure 6.1: Network of connectivity among wetlands via turtle movements detected in the capture-mark-recapture analysis.....	113

Figure 6.2: Relationship between turtle size and inter-wetland movement distance	114
Figure 6.3: Power relationship and the scale-free network of wetland connectivity.....	116
Figure 6.4: Relative rates of immigration into permanent and temporary wetlands in relation to rainfall.....	117
Figure 6.5: Size frequency distributions of turtles captured moving overland at the terrestrial drift fence versus wetland captures	122
Figure 7.1: Management practices in terrestrial habitats that pose a threat to turtles in Booderee national park.....	137

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Terrestrial habitat use in <i>Chelodina longicollis</i>	21
Table 2.2: Wetland use and movements in <i>Chelodina longicollis</i>	21
Table 2.3: Summary of inter-wetland movements for wetland reptiles.....	25
Table 3.1: Patterns of growth in temporary and permanent wetlands	46
Table 4.1: Movement and space use of radio-tracked turtles	62
Table 4.2: Factors influencing movements and spatial ecology of radio-tracked turtles	64
Table 4.3: Environmental factors influencing overland movements at the drift fence according to movement direction and maturity status.....	69
Table 5.1: Turtle behaviour, shell temperature and rainfall during the doubly-labelled water study.....	87
Table 5.2: Water flux and field metabolic rates for <i>Chelodina longicollis</i>	88
Table 5.3: Results of statistical analyses testing for differences in water end energy flux rates between aestivating and translocated turtles	90
Table 5.4: Water flux and field metabolic rates in other species of turtles	96
Table 5.5: Energy trade-offs between aestivation and movement.....	101
Table 6.1: Inter-wetland movement rates for male, female and immature turtles.....	112
Table 6.2: Model selection for factors influencing survival, capture and movement probabilities in the capture-mark-recapture analysis.....	118
Table 6.3: Inter-wetland movement probabilities in the Blacks-Steamers system.....	120
Table 6.4: Inter-wetland movement probabilities in the McKenzie-Windermere system....	121

STATEMENT OF CO-AUTHORSHIP

List of publications associated with this thesis:

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