ABC South West Radio Morning Program with Chela Williams

Friday, 20 March, 2026

Chela Williams

Let's go to the South West, there's a tiny, tiny frog that's no bigger than your fingernail. Now it's called the white-bellied frog and is only found in isolated parts of the Margaret River Region. Now it's also endangered and for years, the team at South West NRM have worked very hard to preserve this unique amphibian. And recently, they've just secured some top-up funding from the State Government to extend their conservation efforts.

Dr Manda Page is the CEO there. Good morning, Dr Page. Happy World Frog Day to you.

Manda Page

Ah, good morning, Chela. You beat me to it. Happy World Frog Day to you too.

Chela Williams

It is a ribbiting Friday now, for those of us who've never heard about the tiny white-bellied frog, tell us a bit about this species and why has is it endangered?

Manda Page

Yeah, so this is a as you said, a tiny frog. Fully grown it's about the size of your thumbnail. And when they're born, they are only like the size of a Rice Bubble, so tiny little frog.

And as you said only live in that Margaret River Region. Unfortunately, this little guy is critically endangered, which means it at the edge of the cliff of extinction, and it's in peril, so it's really important that we do some work to try and look after this little guy.

Chela Williams

And what kind of work have you been doing to try and keep this little guy?

Manda Page

One of the biggest issues for this species and many other frogs unfortunately, is the impacts of climate change. So as everybody knows, climate change is messing with our weather patterns and species that require water, and constant water, wet areas, are not doing so well. So this guy needs these nice moist areas, moist sort of muddy areas to breed, and they need to stay moist throughout that breeding process, or else they don't have young ones. And therefore, you know, conservation gets worse. So as these are drying up, we've got this lovely little project where we are trying to keep those little creek beds wet for longer. So as we know, it's really dry out there now and when I look outside my window and we're all waiting for this rain.

But it's a little way off, and so what we're finding is that their creek beads are drying up sooner than they should be. So we've installed all these irrigation and sprinklers and pumps and sensors and all sorts of things to see if we can actually artificially keep it wet for long enough.

Chela Williams

Oh, it sounds like an intensive project. Now like I said, before, you've managed to get some funding from the State Government, I believe over $57,000 what will it go towards?

Manda Page

Yes, this is actually from the Australian Government. Just correct that one. The State Government can give us some money too, that's okay! So we've been doing this project for a little while, but we wanted to test it for another season.

So with the last grant finishing it meant all of that money and time, we've invested in setting this up was going to go a bit to waste. So the Australian Government graciously have topped up the money, so we can extend it over this season. And that'll give us more data.

But it'll also allow us to start moving into the implementation phase. Like, if we test this and it works, where else can we put it?

Chela Williams

That's fantastic news. I'm talking to a Dr Manda Page, the CEO of South West NRM. Now, you've been also very busy with another species in Margaret River. Locals are having a chance to be able to play a huge role in saving a crayfish.

Now I believe it's the hairy marron that is critically endangered too and you're using some cutting-edge technology to search for this crayfish. First of all, what is a hairy marron, and how does a differ from your regular crayfish?

Manda Page

Yes, so not everybody's heard about the hairy marron, which is interesting, but everybody I think in the South West, anyway, has heard of the smooth marron. And you know, that's the common species that we know throughout this area, and that, you know, is a lovely thing to eat at times.

So it looks very much like a smooth marron, but it has the short bristley hairs on its head and down onto its thorax. The problem is that the smooth marron has expanded in its range, and it's a bit tougher than the smooth marron, so it has actually out competed the smooth marron. In fact the 2 species actually hybridise, which means they breed, and we get these hybridised species, so the smooth marron is sort of taking over from the hairy marron.

And unfortunately, the poor cousin, the hairy marron is not doing as well. In fact, again like the frog is critically endangered and only found in a few little pools.

Chela Williams

Is it a matter of the smooth marron, I believe, is an introduced species kind of breeding itself into and breeding out the hairy marron, is that right?

Manda Page

Yeah, pretty much so, although not introduced to the South West, it's a native species here, but it has been introduced into some waterways that it wasn't there before, and you know, we suspect that was partly because it is such a nice thing to eat, and we've moved it around for those purposes, but it's had an impact on the smooth marron, and you're right. Yeah, we're getting those 2 breeding together and we're losing the hairy marron.

Chela Williams

How are you using e-DNA? I mean, what is that and how does it work?

Manda Page

Yeah, so e-DNA is wonderful new technology that our scientists have got to work with threatened species. So we all shed DNA, microscopic bits of DNA through our skin cells, our saliva, you know, hair feathers, if you're a bird, and that's out in the environment, and what we can do now is we can match microscopic bits of DNA to an actual species if we've done the work. We've got these things called assays which allows us to take samples like water samples or soil samples, and pick up this microscopic evidence that the species is there or somewhere around there.

And that allows us to then go and do more detailed surveys, and see if we can find them. So it's a brilliant way to try and find these really cryptic things, or these things that are at really low densities, or that might be impacted by our methods of trying to catch them.

Chela Williams

Wow, that sounds like such intricate work. And a lot of fun too, by the sounds of it.

Manda Page

Yeah come and collect some water and dirt samples.

Chela Williams

Yeah, I think I'd rather be doing that some days. Thank you so much for your time in telling us all about it, Dr Page.

Manda Page

Thank you very much. Have a great day.

Chela Williams

You too. That's Dr Manda Page, South West NRM's CEO telling us about the hairy marron and the tiny white-bellied frog, hopefully, we will hear some good news out of their research soon.