

Habitat protection for endangered mud turtle could come too late

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Remaining 150 turtles threatened by border wall

TUCSON, Ariz. — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced final critical habitat protection June 22 for the endangered [Sonoyta mud turtle](#). These highly aquatic turtles are found only in Pima County, Ariz. and Sonora, Mexico.

“These little turtles are hanging on by a thread and need all the protection they can get,” Randy Serraglio at the Center for Biological Diversity said. “This critical habitat designation is a welcome step, but the hard truth is that the lawless construction of the border wall could render the new protections meaningless.”

The critical habitat consists of 12.3 acres in the Rio Sonoyta watershed of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Pima County. This area is currently occupied by the only known population of Sonoyta mud turtles left in the United States — an estimated 150 turtles living in a small, spring-fed pond just over 100 yards away from the border with Mexico.

“In its zeal to complete its racist border wall, the Trump administration has waived dozens of environmental laws, including the Endangered Species Act,” Serraglio said. “Critical habitat normally doubles a species’ chance of survival and recovery, but in this case it will not help against the biggest threat the turtle faces.”

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With webbed feet and an innate ability to swim, the Sonoyta mud turtle has evolved to be highly aquatic in one of the driest parts of the Sonoran Desert. Diversion of surface water and pumping of groundwater have led to the loss of much of the watery habitat the turtle needs to survive.

Drought conditions that have persisted for the past 20 years have worsened the turtle's habitat loss. Further, long stretches of dry streams have isolated populations of the turtles, limiting opportunities for migration. Now the lone U.S. population is threatened by vast groundwater pumping to support border-wall construction.

"The spring water that supports the tiny remaining population of Sonoyta mud turtles in the U.S. comes from an aquifer that was laid down thousands of years ago," Serraglio said.

"Border-wall construction crews are sucking that water out of the ground at a stunning and completely unsustainable rate. If it continues, it'll only be a matter of time before the Sonoyta mud turtle becomes the latest casualty of Trump's border blitzkrieg," he added.

Four populations are also currently known in Mexico, but the loss of the turtle has already been reported from an additional site. At all the sites, the number of turtles has declined as aquatic habitat has been reduced.