# Feral snails are infesting Swan River

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They grow up to 4cm and weigh just a few grams but when you put 3.6 billion of them in the Swan River, they become feral invaders that wreak environmental havoc.

Scientists are still unsure about the extent of the damage caused by the innocuous-looking sea snail but they do know that they carry parasites that cause skin diseases in people and can infect wading birds and other marine life.

Introduced from the Eastern States in the 1950s and with no predators, the snail has become the most common gastropod in the river.

Placed side by side, the tiny snails would cover an area of more than 1.7sqkm — more than a third the size of Kings Park.

They churn up enough silt every day to fill 60 Olympic-sized swimming pools and excrete 23 tonnes of waste a day.

Thomas Wernberg, from the Oceans Institute at the University of WA, and fellow scientist Mads Thomsen have documented the extent of the infestation in a paper published in the Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf Science journal.

The pair suggest the creatures would have had an "ecosystemwide" impact on the river since their introduction.

Dr Wernberg said the snail, batillaria australis, was thought to have been introduced in live oysters imported from the Eastern States as part of a failed bid to establish an oyster industry in Perth.

He said there had been little research into the snails' environmental impact but they were thought to contribute to low oxygen levels in the Swan by churning up the nutrient-rich river bed and burying organic waste that broke down on the river floor, using up oxygen.

An estimated one billion macroalgae live on the pest snails' shells and Dr Wernberg said by providing a hard surface for the algae to grow, the snails contributed to problems of drift algae.

"About 1.7 sqkm of batillaria substratum move around on a daily basis in the Swan River," he said.

"These moving 'mini reefs' provide a habitat resource for species like macroalgae that often are substratum limited."

Swan River Trust acting principal scientist Jeff Cosgrove said it was too late to stop the snail invasion.

## TINY INVADERS

**Scientific name:** *Batillaria Australis*

**Size:** Between 3cm and 4cm

**Population:** More than 3.6 billion

**Found:** From Fremantle to the Narrows Bridge, but believed to be throughout the river system

**Life span:** Two to three years