

WORLD  
worldAussie croc wrangler joins  
Indonesia bid to save tyre-tied  
reptile

An Australian television personality has thrown his hat in the ring to help capture a giant Indonesian crocodile and remove a motorcycle tyre stuck around its neck. Matt Wright, host of National Geographic's "Monster Croc Wrangler" show, was on the island of Sulawesi Thursday with a team using traps baited with duck, a drone and even a harpoon in a bid to reel in the reptile.

Tractors snarl Valencia as farmers  
demand fair prices

Thousands of Spanish farmers were out protesting on Friday, their tractors gridlocking the streets of Spain's third-largest city as they demanded "fair prices" for their products. Since the end of January, thousands of farmers and livestock breeders have joined a growing wave of protest over low prices and rising production costs which unions say have eroded profitability across the sector

## Morocco oasis risks becoming mirage

Skoura | Morocco

Dead palm trees lie on dry, yellowish earth near an abandoned adobe house in Morocco's arid southeast, as drought threatens ancient oases. "I grew up in this oasis and I have seen it shrink," says 53-year-old Mohamed El Houkari, who lives in Skoura, a rural oasis area of around 40 square kilometres (15 square miles).

For centuries, Morocco's oases have been home to human settlements, agriculture, and important architectural and cultural heritage, thanks also to trans-Saharan trade caravan routes.

Long a buffer against desertification, they have gone through cycles of drought in recent decades and are now "threatened with extinction", Greenpeace has warned, due to the impact of high temperatures.

In most of the Skoura oasis, the ground is dry and cracked.

Until the 1980s, "pomegranate and apple trees flourished here", says Houkari, who is also part of a local development NGO.

Now, only hardy olive trees grow in the shadow of the palms.

## Over-exploitation

The Skoura region used to attract farmers. These days, most young people work elsewhere, though some stay for the developing tourism sector.

"I am ready to sell my land, but there is nobody to buy it. Everyone has left," says Ahmed, a farmer.



Long a buffer against desertification, Morocco's oases have gone through cycles of drought in recent decades and according to Greenpeace are now threatened with extinction

The man in his 50s settled in Skoura with his family 25 years ago, "when the area was green and there was plenty of water. But the drought has destroyed everything".

Electrician Abdeljalil spends most of his time between the cities of Marrakesh and Agadir. "Our life isn't here anymore," the 37-year-old says.

He observes that the use of electric pumps and has contributed to the overexploitation of the groundwater.

Residents say they now need to dig down over 40 metres (130 feet) to find water, compared to seven to 10 metres (23-33 feet) in the 1980s.

Houkari laments the abandonment of traditional methods -- like the "khatarat" canal irrigation system -- that allowed water

to be distributed "economically and rationally".

Using the pumps is also costly, Ahmed, the farmer complains.

Morocco's high level of water stress doesn't just affect life in the oases.

In 2017, protests were held in the semi-desert southern town of Zagora against repeated water cuts.

This year, the kingdom launched an almost \$12 billion national program for the supply of potable and irrigation water through to 2027.

Under a separate initiative, "we set ourselves the goal of mobilising one billion cubic meters (35 billion cubic feet) of water by the end of 2020," says Brahim Hafidi, director-general of the national agency for the development of oasis zones

(ANDZOA), referring to efforts to build dams and rehabilitate irrigation canals.

## 'Very real' danger

According to Greenpeace, droughts have increased in frequency in Tunisia, Morocco, Syria and Algeria over the past decades, rising from once every five years to once every two years in Morocco.

"Oases rely on subterranean waters, which generally come from snow", notes Lahcen El Maimouni, a local academic, who says global warming has hurt the oases.

The Atlas mountains, visible on the horizon from Skoura, are capped in white.

But the snow is not enough to sustain the dry beds of the wadis that cross the oasis, and the effects of drought are visible along the rugged road that leads to Skoura.

To rehabilitate oasis areas, ANDZOA has planted three million trees, the agency's director-general says.

Morocco has lost two-thirds of its 14 million palms over the last century, according to official figures.

But for Skoura resident Houkari, saving the oases also requires raising awareness of the risk of desertification.

Palm trees have even been removed and sold to villa owners, he adds with regret.

"The danger of the oases disappearing is very real", he says, in front of a dry irrigation canal.

Russian soldier rolls out tanks  
for romantic manoeuvre

The tanks used for the romantic manoeuvre also take part in the annual Victory Parade on Red Square

## Moscow

A Russian soldier has pulled out all the stops to propose to his girlfriend, with his fellow officers manoeuvring 16 tanks to surround the couple in a heart shape.

The high-octane romantic stunt was filmed in a video published by the defence ministry on Friday, Valentine's Day. As snow fell, the T-72B3 tanks rolled into position on the Alabino training ground outside Moscow.

Lieutenant Denis Kazantsev led his long-term partner Alexandra Kopytova into the centre as she held her hands over her eyes, the defence ministry's TV channel Zvezda reported.

Kazantsev, a platoon commander, went down on bended knee, holding a bunch of red roses.

"We've been together a very long time. We've stood the test of time and distance. Marry me!" he said as his girlfriend nodded silently. He then put a ring on her finger.

"I still don't understand what's going on," Kopytova told a television reporter at the scene. "It's very unexpected."

The tanks used for the romantic manoeuvre also take part in the annual Victory Parade on Red Square, Zvezda reported.

"No one has ever seen such a large-scale proposal," its reporter said.

## Antarctica registers temperature of over 20 C

Sao Paulo

Scientists in Antarctica have recorded a new record temperature of 20.75 degrees Celsius (69.35 Fahrenheit), breaking the barrier of 20 degrees for the first time on the continent, a researcher said Thursday.

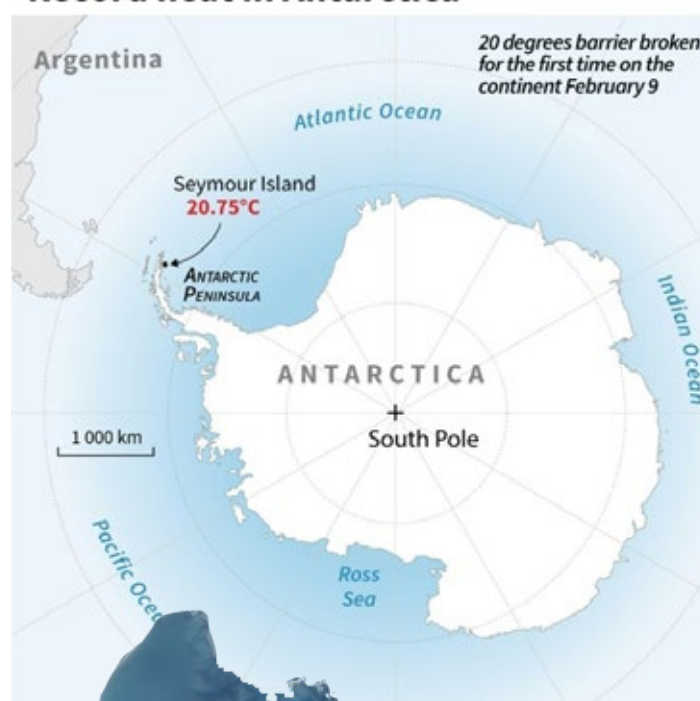
"We'd never seen a temperature this high in Antarctica," Brazilian scientist Carlos Schaefer told AFP.

He cautioned that the reading, taken at a monitoring station on an island off the continent's northern tip on February 9, "has no meaning in terms of a climate-change trend," because it is a one-off temperature and not part of a long-term data set.

But news that the icy continent is now recording temperatures in the relatively balmy 20s is likely to further fuel fears about the warming of the planet.

The reading was taken at Seymour Island, part of a chain off

## Record heat in Antarctica



the peninsula that curves out from the northern tip of Antarctica.

The island is home to Argentina's Marambaia base.

bio research base.

Schaefer, a soil scientist, said the reading was taken as part of a 20-year-old research project on the impact of climate change on the region's permafrost.

The previous high was in the 19s, he said.

"We can't use this to anticipate climatic changes in the future. It's a data point," he said.

"It's simply a signal that something different is happening in that area."

Still, he added, a temperature that high had never been registered in Antarctica.

Accelerating melt-off from glaciers and especially ice sheets in Antarctica is helping drive sea level rises, threatening coastal megacities and small island nations.

The news came a week after Argentina's National Meteorological Service recorded the hottest day on record for Argentine Antarctica: 18.3 degrees Celsius at midday at the Esperanza base, located near the tip of the Antarctic peninsula.

The previous record stood at 17.5 degrees on March 24, 2015, it said. It has been recording Antarctic temperatures since 1961.

