

Keep a 'clean' routine: Bellinger River Snapping Turtle mortality

October 2015, Primefact 1401, second edition
Biosecurity NSW

Bellinger River Snapping Turtle Mortality Event

NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) scientists have detected a new virus believed to be the cause of the Bellinger River Snapping Turtle (*Myuchelys georgesi*; BRST) mortalities.

There is no evidence to suggest the virus affects other turtle species in this river system.

However, until we learn more about the virus, it is important to take steps that might prevent it from spreading to unaffected areas or other river catchments.

Bellinger River 'clean' routine

Thorough cleaning of vehicles, boats, kayaks and canoes, boat trailers and equipment when moving from affected areas of the Bellinger River to unaffected areas or other waterways may significantly reduce the risk of transporting this virus.



Washing down kayaks and fishing gear with soapy water (Photograph: NSW DPI)

How community can help

Community members can help minimise the risk of spreading the virus by implementing the following hygiene routines whilst visiting the Bellinger River.

When visiting the Bellinger River

- Do not handle or collect any sick or dead Bellinger River Snapping Turtles or other species of turtle. Report sick and dead turtles to the OEHL Environment Line **131 555**. *The taking of animals from the wild is against the law*
- Swim in only one location, or clean and thoroughly dry swimming gear between visits
- Pay attention to signage

When leaving the Bellinger River

- Drain and wash boats and canoes with soapy water and dry thoroughly before re-use
- Dispose of all biological material collected during cleaning in the general waste
- Pay particular attention to hard to clean areas such as boots, wheel arches, undersides of kayaks and fishing gear
- Ensure wash water does not enter any NSW waterway

What has happened to the turtles?

In February 2015, observations of sick and dead turtles were reported in a section of the Bellinger River on the north coast of NSW. Only one species appears to be affected, the Bellinger River Snapping Turtle, *Myuchelys georgesi*.

A multi-agency Incident Management Team (IMT) was promptly established to respond to the wildlife emergency, with one of the key goals to investigate the possible cause of the turtle illness and to minimise the potential spread of the observed turtle illness.

Sick Bellinger River Snapping Turtles (Photograph: OEH)



Government response includes the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), Wildlife Health Australia (WHA), Department of Primary Industries (DPI), Local Land Services (LLS) and Taronga Zoo Registry of Wildlife Health.

The cause of the mortalities was determined to be a new virus after scientists at the Elizabeth Macarthur Institute worked methodically to hone in on the pathogen that was causing the symptoms.

Biosecurity and containment measures will continue to be applied to all agency activities near the affected areas of Bellinger River. These measures include detailed advice on how to minimise the potential risk of spreading the virus.

Are any other animals affected?

No other species of animals are known to be affected. Other species of turtles and reptiles have been observed to be healthy in the same section of the Bellinger River. If you believe you have seen other species that are showing the same symptoms, report it to **131 555** immediately.

Is the water safe?

The results of standard tests undertaken so far show that the Bellinger River water falls within normal ranges for water quality. There is no evidence that this agent has had any impact on human health.

How to report observations of sick turtles

If you observe dead or sick turtles please phone: OEH Environment Line **131 555**.

If you observe any other suspected aquatic pest species or evidence of disease in your local waterway please phone: DPI Aquatic Biosecurity Hotline on 02 4916 3877 or 131 555 or email: aquatic.pests@dpi.nsw.gov.au

Bellinger River Snapping Turtles

To avoid spreading potential pathogens to turtles in other areas or catchments



Do not handle or collect sick or dead turtles



Swim in only one location or clean and dry swimming gear between visits



Wash down canoes with soapy water and dry thoroughly before re-use

To report sick or dead turtles phone 131 555

More information

Visit DPI for more information wildlife health at <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/biosecurity/animal/wildlife-and-feral-animals>

Acknowledgments

Bellingen Shire Council, OEH, NPWS, Taronga Registry of Wildlife Health, WHA, LLS, EPA North Coast Public Health Unit and the local community.

For updates go to www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/factsheets

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Published by the NSW Department of Primary Industries.

INT15/100161, JTN 13735