

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

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Biosecurity NSW

Bellinger River Snapping Turtle Mortality Event

Bellinger River 'clean' routine

While there is no evidence of a specific disease agent present in the Bellinger River Snapping Turtle population, prevention of spread of emerging or suspected pests and disease is always better than a cure. Thorough cleaning of vehicles, boats, kayaks and canoes, boat trailers and equipment when moving from affected areas of Bellinger River to unaffected areas or other waterways can significantly reduce the risk of transporting aquatic pests and disease.

How community can help

After more than a month of detailed investigation into the mortality of Bellinger River Snapping Turtles, the coordinating agencies and organisations are still unable to describe the cause of the observed mortality. The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) preliminary investigation found no evidence of water contamination, herbicides or pesticides.

Due to the unknown nature of the cause of the mortality DPI is applying the precautionary principle and is developing a number of recommended biosecurity and hygiene protocols to reduce the risk of spread.

Community members can help minimise risk of spread by implementing the following hygiene and 'clean' routines whilst visiting the Bellinger River, and after spending time in and around the affected areas of the Bellinger River.

When visiting the Bellinger River

- Do not handle or collect sick or dead turtles
- Swim in only one location, or clean and thoroughly dry swimming gear between visits
- Pay attention to signage

When leaving the Bellinger River

- Wash down canoes with soapy water and dry thoroughly before re-use
- Dispose of any biological material collected during cleaning in the general waste
- Pay particular attention to where biological material tends to accumulate such as boots, wheel arches, undersides of kayaks and fishing gear
- Drain all water from canoes and boats when leaving a location – ensure waste water does not enter any other NSW waterway

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



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, *Myuchelis georgesii*.

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)



The IMT included staff from the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), Wildlife Health Australia (WHA), Department of Primary Industries (DPI), Local Land Services (LLS) and Taronga Zoo.

The DPI will continue to coordinate the disease investigation with numerous expert pathologists from NSW, Australia and international laboratories working to investigate if disease is a factor.

Biosecurity and containment measures will continue to be applied to all agency activities near the affected areas of Bellinger River whilst the investigation continues. These measures include detailed advice as to how to minimise the potential risk of spread of any pests and disease.

Are any other animals affected?

No. Other species of turtles and reptiles have been observed to be healthy in the same section of the Bellinger River.

Are there any impacts upon human health?

No. NSW Public Health investigation has confirmed there is no impact on human health from swimming in the Bellinger River.

How to report observations of sick turtles

If you observe dead or sick turtles please phone: 131 555

If you observe any other suspected pest or disease in your local waterway please phone:

DPI Aquatic Biosecurity Hotline on 02 4916 3877 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/wild-life-and-feral-animals>

Acknowledgments

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

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