



Bellinger River turtle mortality update: #5

Turtles for captive breeding have been collected from the Bellinger River last week as part of a collaboration between NSW Government agencies and wildlife health specialists following the recent unexplained mortality of Bellinger River Snapping Turtles.

Since February this year, the endemic Bellinger River Snapping Turtles has been devastated by an unknown fatal infectious disease. The Bellinger River Snapping Turtle is only found in the Bellinger Catchment and it is feared that the outbreak could result in the extinction of this species.

Office of Environment and Heritage, Regional Manager, Don Arnold for the, said to help maintain biosecurity the 10 male and 7 female turtles will be held in a Biosecurity approved location as part of the program.

“There is still some considerable work to be done to confirm that these apparently healthy turtles are in fact free of the disease, before a breeding program can be attempted”, Mr Arnold cautioned.

“Surveys indicate that more than 90% of the Bellinger River Snapping Turtle habitat is now affected by the unknown disease.

“From the limited surveys in the headwaters of the Bellinger River no obvious sign of the disease has been found, but the disease front appears to continuing its advance upstream.

“Despite the potential success of a captive breeding program, the areas that are currently free of the disease still hold the best chance for recovery of the population through natural replacement over the coming years”, Mr Arnold said.

Only Bellinger River Snapping Turtles (*Myuchelys georgesii*) appear to be affected, with more than 350 known to have died from severe internal infection including major organ damage.

External symptoms include eye and body lesions and lethargy.

Pathologists from the nation’s leading animal health laboratories are continuing to work on analysis of the outbreak and have co-opted specialist support from interstate and overseas. No conclusive evidence about the type or nature of the pathogen has yet been identified.

What you can do:

- To help prevent potential spread of whatever may be causing the problem people are advised not to enter the water, handle the turtles or try to capture any turtles in the Bellinger River.
- People swimming in the river are asked to swim only in one location to avoid affecting other areas.
- If people are using canoes or other water craft it is recommended that these are washed down with warm soapy water and thoroughly dried for 24-48 hours before reuse. Avoid using in other waterways if at all possible.
- If you find a sick or injured turtle in the Bellinger River, please report the details to Environment Line on telephone 131555. Avoid handling sick turtles.

ENDS

Media contact: 24 hour media line 99955347

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