Bellinger River turtle mortality update: #3

A collaboration of NSW Government agencies and wildlife health specialists is continuing to work with Bellingen Shire Council (BSC) and the community in response to an unexplained mortality event in the population of Bellinger River Snapping Turtles in the Bellinger River.

Operating from the Bellingen SES headquarters the Incident Management Team led by Local Land Service (LLS) and National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has conducted surveillance of turtle habitat along the Bellinger and Kalang Rivers to assess the extent of the problem.

Surveys indicate that turtles along 42km of the Bellinger River between Bishops Creek at Darkwood and Lavenders Bridge in Bellingen are affected.

More than 60% of the available habitat of the Bellinger River Snapping Turtle is within this zone.

Limited surveys in the Kalang River where the Bellinger River Snapping Turtle has been previously known to frequent, has found no obvious sign of the disease.

Future surveys will focus on monitoring possible spread into clean areas to assist planning for recovery of the species.

A community information session is scheduled for Monday 23 March 2015 at the Bellingen Uniting Church Hall commencing at 5.30pm, and facilitated by Councillor Steve Klipin, to detail the response and findings so far, and seek community input on future action.

Only Bellinger River Snapping Turtles (Myuchelys georgesi) are affected, with more than 300 sick or dead turtles found to date, with severe internal symptoms including major organ damage. External symptoms include blindness leading to the inability to feed and subsequent starvation.

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:

- This outbreak is specific to one species of turtle and is not known to affect humans.
- To help prevent potential spread of whatever may be causing the problem people are advised to report sick turtle sightings but 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.
- Do not enter the New England National Park upstream of Cool Creek, where the park has been closed to the public.

Contact:

- Telephone 131 555 to report any sightings of sick or dead turtles.

ENDS

Media contact: 24 hour media line 99955347
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