



Bellinger River Snapping Turtles #4

About 45 interested community members attended a public information session in Bellingen last night (23/3) to hear from experts involved in investigating the deaths of Bellinger River Snapping Turtles.

Facilitated by Bellingen Shire Councillor Steve Klipin, the meeting provided information on the situation facing the turtle population, the actions taken so far as part of the emergency response, the significant uncertainties involved in the investigation and plans for future management.

“It has been great to see the many agencies and scientific institutions collaborating in the emergency response in an effort to investigate possible causes and epidemiology, and address animal welfare, biosecurity, and species conservation issues”, Steve said.

Dr Karrie Rose, from the Australian Registry of Wildlife Health at the Taronga Conservation Society, explained the diagnostic sciences underpinning the investigation into the illness of the Bellinger River Snapping Turtles, involving scientists from Taronga, Department Primary Industries and CSIRO as well as expertise from five Australian and international universities.

“The breadth, depth and speed of the investigation are unprecedented for a wildlife disease outbreak in Australia,” Ms Rose explained.

“Overall, we have found a highly consistent set of lesions affecting the internal organs in the turtles examined. The lesions are acute, sudden and inflammatory, which is most consistent with the presence of an infectious or parasitic agent.

“We have not yet found evidence of a highly pathogenic organism, but the investigation continues”, Ms Rose said.

Manager North East Region of Regional Operations and Heritage (OEH) Mr Don Arnold outlined the plan to establish a healthy captive breeding population of Bellinger River snapping turtle as insurance against the immediate disease threat to the species in the wild.

“The aim is to collect at least ten healthy adults and place them in quarantine where we can breed from them”, Mr Arnold said..

“Further collection would be undertaken as facilities became available, with a target of about 40 individuals,” he said.

Media contact: 24 hour media line 99955347

Visit us on the web:www.environment.nsw.gov.au

People swimming in the river are also asked to swim only in one location to avoid potentially affecting other areas, particularly the Kalang River catchment which still appears to be a safe haven for healthy turtles.

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.

The Incident Management Team will wind down its operations this week while ramping up the recovery program and sustaining the investigation into the illness. Incident Controller Mr Geoff Ross wished to thank the Bellingen community for its vigilance and willingness to support the response to this unprecedented wildlife health emergency.

“We hope that the community will continue to support the ongoing agency response program, implement the necessary hygiene protocols, and monitor their patch of river for any developments.”

ENDS