

Bellinger River Virus Disease Response **An inspiring story – expanded version**

In 2015, reports of dead and dying turtles washing onto the banks of the Bellinger River sent shock waves through conservation scientists, wildlife managers, veterinarians, wildlife careers and the close-knit Bellingen community. As more and more turtles were reported dead, and as early attempts to treat sick animals proved ineffective, the scale of the disaster emerged; a mass mortality event with an unknown cause, rapidly wiping out the small, endemic population of the Bellinger River Snapping Turtle.

Early investigations ruled out pollution and toxicity as the cause, and so the emergency rescue quickly adapted to wildlife disease being the most likely driver of the unfolding crisis. As days passed and mortality figures climbed it was clear that the disease was spreading unchecked up stream. Conservation managers and scientists worked quickly with the incident control team and the local community to identify upper reaches of the river they hoped would contain healthy animals. An emergency capture was planned, with the aim of establishing an insurance population, and within weeks of the first reports of sick turtles, the team were urgently retrieving animals as insurance against possible extinction.

At all times, there was intense community scrutiny and expectation; a need to know and be provided with explanations. The Bellinger River is at the heart of the Bellingen community, and the plight of the turtle concerned many. The work to collect a healthy insurance population had to balance urgency and uncertainty. Strict biosecurity guidelines were put in place for the capture and transportation of animals outside the catchment, and a quarantine facility had to be built from the ground up at Western Sydney University. Just seventeen healthy turtles were able to be recovered from the upper reaches of the river before the disease advanced. These animals now form the basis of a captive breeding population, with over 80 of their offspring released into the Bellinger River since 2018.

Today, the Bellinger River Snapping Turtle program is a well-established conservation recovery program which owes its success to the dedication and collaboration of a broad range of people. The recovery effort is overseen by an expert reference group, which provides knowledge and expertise on wildlife health, virology, biosecurity, genetics, turtle ecology, survey design, captive breeding and translocation. Outside the reference group, numerous people provide local knowledge and practical expertise ranging from general river health, riparian restoration, landholder access and volunteer management. Local landholders and volunteers play an important role in the program. For example, volunteers assist with biannual surveys and water quality monitoring, while over 50 private landowners allow access to river habitat for surveys and monitoring.

Without the large number of dedicated people, all working toward a common goal, the Bellinger River Snapping Turtle recovery program would not be where it is today. The small government team leading the program believe it is a privilege to work on the recovery of the turtle and are thankful to the species experts, conservation managers, volunteers and locals who contribute to the shared goal of recovering the species in the wild. Strong collaborations and enduring partnerships, which were established during the emergency response and early conservation planning, remain a key strength in the recovery of this turtle.

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