Experts gather to confront plague of turtle deaths

The extraordinary number of sick and dead turtles washing ashore on the Queensland coast will be discussed by experts from around Australia at a special workshop tomorrow (Friday July 22).

To be held at Reef HQ in Townsville, the workshop has attracted veterinarians, turtle researchers, rangers and wildlife carers from the Northern Territory, NSW, Victoria and Queensland.

With the turtles facing unprecedented threats, such as the loss of seagrasses following this year's floods and cyclone, the workshop will provide scientists and conservationists with an opportunity to share the latest science, experience and rehabilitation techniques in an effort to protect the species.

The Sea Turtle Health and Rehabilitation Workshop is being organized by the Sea Turtle Foundation, James Cook University and Reef HQ, and co-sponsored by WWF, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and NQ Dry Tropics.

Dr Ellen Ariel, Senior Lecturer at James Cook University's School of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences, said that while the workshop had been planned months ago it had become very timely due to the strandings.

"We have seen a massive increase in turtles being found dead or dying over the past few months to the point where Townsville's turtle hospital has been overwhelmed with sick animals," she said.

Some of the topics to be discussed include the role that communities can play in turtle conservation.

The workshop will allow veterinarians and biologists to discuss how to treat sick and injured marine species in their areas and then pool this information to come up with a best practice for how to treat the anticipated flood of turtles that are likely to continue washing up on Queensland beaches.

The Sea Turtle Foundation's Project Manager, Julie Traweek, said the workshop was bringing together Australia's leading experts on turtle health in one place at one time to advise on ways to handle the overwhelming number of turtles stranding along Australia's coastline.

"Marine scientists are alarmed at the loss of seagrass following several years of high intensity cyclones and the runoff following extremely high rainfall wet seasons," she said. "Seagrass is the main diet for green turtles and dugong and it is thought that in many areas along the coast these animals are starving to death."

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's Ecosystem Conservation and Sustainable Use Manager Dr Mark Read said GBRMPA was pleased to be supporting and contributing to the inaugural sea turtle rehabilitation workshop.

"We have concerns that the cumulative effects of several years of extreme weather and degradation of seagrass habitats will lead to a significant increase in marine turtle strandings on our beaches, including animals that will turn up injured or in very poor condition," Dr Read said.
"Rehabilitation is an important component of an overall strategy for responding to these strandings, and the workshop will provide an excellent opportunity to share information and the latest research on turtle health, injury, and rehabilitation, and to network with other turtle specialists from around Australia."

WWF spokesperson Cliff Cobbo said the loss of the seagrasses was in addition to other pressures such as the spread of the fibropapilloma virus, coastal development and interaction with fishing nets and lines.

"We are seeing some fantastic sharing of knowledge between scientists, Traditional Owners and coastal communities as people come together to protect turtles from a growing range of threats," he said.

"There has never been a more important time for this level of collaboration."

NQ Dry Tropics Project Officer Karen Stapleton said the organisation was keen to sponsor the workshop.

"We fully support the Sea Turtle Foundation with its vision, and its aim to share information about marine turtle health and wellbeing at a national scale," she said, "and we are looking forward to learning about what other groups are doing with marine turtle health, so that we can also participate in the recovery of marine turtle species".

[Eds note: The workshop which will run from 9am to 5pm on Friday July 22 is open to the media. Pls contact Olivia McKenna from ReefHQ for access. Olivia McKenna 07 4750 0800 or marketing@reefhq.com.au]