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Increased population is leading to sick turtles

University of Queensland researchers have discovered that one of the effects of increased human population is stress being placed on the environment leading to sick turtles.

Staff from the Veterinary Marine Animal Research, Teaching and Investigation (Vet-MARTI) unit within the School of Veterinary Science have been conducting an in-depth investigation to determine the diseases and causes of death in green and loggerhead turtles in Southern Queensland.

Director of Vet-MARTI, Dr Mark Flint, has found that these turtles are dying due to the environment they live in, rather than from the ingestion of foreign items.

"The increases in disease syndromes we are seeing within Moreton Bay are likely to be caused by environmental stressors reducing the quality of the waters in which the turtles live," Dr Flint said.

"This contrasts to open ocean studies that have focused on the ingestion of items such as garbage bags, shredded plastic and ghost nets," Dr Flint said.

"There is a growing body of evidence that increased populations in major cities such as Brisbane are having an effect on the health of marine turtles."

Dr Flint said findings conducted by Vet-MARTI had shown that green turtles found stranded within the shallow waters of Moreton Bay were dying due to parasites, gastrointestinal disorders and infectious diseases. This differed from reports of turtle deaths studied in deep waters outside of the Bay.

"The approach we have taken to this investigation has allowed us to make more accurate diagnoses of diseases and causes of death," he said.

"We have established baseline medical data to determine which animals are 'healthy' and used this to compare with 'unhealthy' animals to diagnose diseases through working with a variety of veterinary specialists and expert biologists."

Dr Flint believes they have only just begun and need to continue to discover improved and more accurate ways of identifying diseases in turtles and other marine animals.

"We need to use these findings to help rehabilitation centres attempting to save these animals, work these results into Marine Area Protection management plans and raise public awareness," Dr Flint said.

This project has been running for three years and is a joint collaboration with Australia Zoo, Sea World, Underwater World and the Queensland Department of Environment and Resource Management.

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