

Cleland exhibit helping Lower Lakes freshwater turtles

A Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) initiative is helping to care for turtles from the Lower Lakes that have recovered from tubeworm encrustation but are unable to fend for themselves in the wild.

A turtle exhibit at Cleland Wildlife Park, which opens today, has been established to address the impact of saline waters of the Lower Lakes on native freshwater turtles.

Four turtles, two short-necked and two long-necked, will be released into their new home by Lower Lakes Turtle Project volunteers and DENR staff from Cleland Wildlife Park and the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth program.

Lower Lakes Turtle Project coordinator Kerri Bartley said low water levels has caused areas of the Murray Darling Basin, including the Lower Lakes, to become highly saline, and such salinity levels are having a major impact on flora and fauna including native freshwater turtles.

"Poor water quality causes a range of health problems for turtles including shell rot, eye infections, skin infections and respiratory problems," she said.

"Saline environments provide the ideal habitat for tubeworms, which can encrust the upper and lower shell of freshwater turtles. This can lead to drowning and restrict the turtle's movement leaving them susceptible to predation.

"Turtles have been found with up to four times their body weight of tubeworm infestation growing on their shells. Many of the conditions can be treated or reversed and volunteers from Goolwa and Milang have been helping with rehabilitation by removing tubeworms and monitoring their progress before release back into the wild.

"So far more than 2,000 freshwater turtles have been rehabilitated and released and this would not have been possible without the support and commitment from community volunteers.

"But unfortunately, while lake levels are rising and conditions are improving, not all of the turtles are able to be released back into the wild, due to the effects of the tubeworm and salinity levels, so a turtle exhibit at Cleland Wildlife Park has been created to accommodate these patients that are unable to fend for themselves in the wild."

The Cleland Wildlife Park Turtle Exhibit will be open to the public and offers the opportunity for visitors to explore the story of the water resource issues of the lower River Murray, while at the same time protecting the native creatures.

Media: The new Turtle Exhibit will be officially opened at 11am on Monday 16 August in the Oceans to Outback section of Cleland Wildlife Park.

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