

Volunteers help save tortoises infested with worms in Lower Lakes

The Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) is working with local volunteers, the Native Animal Network, KESAB, and scientists from PIRSA and the South Australian Museum to save tortoises infested with tube worms in the Lower Lakes and move them to a safer home.

DEH Senior Ranger for the Coorong and Lower Lakes District, Stuart Hicks, said many tortoises were rescued during the recent clean-up of the region sponsored by KESAB.

"During the clean-up last weekend, about 50 tortoises were found, many in a serious condition," Mr Hicks said.

"Tube worms attach to the shell of the tortoises and create a hard calcium mass, up to a few inches thick, which looks like coral.

"The calcium weighs down the animal and covers the openings to the shell, stopping the limbs, head or tail from exiting the shell and restricting the animal's movement and capacity to feed.

"The tortoises collected on the weekend have since been cleaned and are being held in a temporary facility by Native Animal Network volunteers," Mr Hicks said.

"DEH is providing support and advice to the volunteers, and investigating the best location for the tortoises to be released.

"Once we've agreed on a suitable location, trained Native Animal Network volunteers will release the animals with the help of DEH staff.

"This will be done soon, because the tortoises shouldn't be kept in captivity for longer than two weeks," Mr Hicks said.

"The location needs to be somewhere in the lower River Murray system that is less saline than the tortoises' current habitat, so the tube worms won't be able to survive.

"It's important that only trained volunteers and animal specialists are involved in cleaning and relocating the tortoises, because of the risks of disease transmission and environmental contamination.

"If anyone finds a sick or injured tortoise, please take it to Tony at Goolwa Tanks, 58 Gardiner Street, Goolwa, phone 8555 0400, or Deanne Smith at 27 Corio Terrace, Goolwa, phone 0407 726 351.

"All native reptiles are protected in South Australia, so a permit is required if a member of the public wishes to keep a tortoise in captivity.

"Written permission from DEH is required to release a rescued animal, unless the rescue permit for the animal includes a special condition allowing its release," Mr Hicks said.

For more information, contact the DEH Coorong and Lakes District office on 8555 3059.

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