

WA dolphins to be bolstered by report recommendations

DEC and the Swan River Trust will implement recommendations contained in Chief Scientist Lyn Beazley's report into the deaths of six dolphins in the Swan Canning Riverpark in 2009.

The recommendations relate to research, community awareness, protocols and the establishment of a working group to investigate the ongoing health of the Swan River dolphins and are the first steps to ensuring the well-being of the dolphins, as well as contributing to the health of the rivers.

In her report, Professor Beazley said three dolphins (including a dolphin that died in 2007) were believed to have died from ulcerative skin lesions, caused by a virus commonly referred to as Tattoo Skin Disease.

A fourth dolphin died from a fungal infection of the brain and a fifth dolphin suffered from bronchopneumonia, although this dolphin also had severe fishing line entanglement.

Two dolphins were too decomposed to determine the cause of death.

Professor Beazley said the dolphins appeared to have died after an inflow of fresh water associated with rainfall events in winter and spring.

"The reduced salinity may have caused cellular damage to the epidermis (outer layer of the skin), leading to increased susceptibility to viral attack," she said.

Professor Beazley said exposure to fresh water inflows also appeared to have contributed to the recent death of two dolphins in the Port River in Adelaide.

She said it was not possible to determine if other factors – including exposure to contaminants and stress induced by human activities – had predisposed the dolphins to disease.

Environment Minister Donna Faragher said the report highlighted the need for ongoing research and a coordinated approach

to the protection of dolphins in the Swan River Riverpark. The implementation of the recommendations would supplement the extensive work being undertaken by the Government to protect and preserve the Swan Canning river system.

"We have secured an additional \$250,000 in the 2010–11 State Budget to help us begin to implement the recommendations, which will also be co-funded through existing programs," she said

Some of the new initiatives will include:

- an immediate assessment of the dolphin community frequenting the rivers to provide an accurate estimate of the number and population structure
- establishment of a photographic record of the dolphin community and to determine the incidence of Tattoo Skin Disease in the population
- creation of 'report cards' to monitor estuarine health, in conjunction with the departments of Water and Fisheries
- \$60,000 for emergency collection and post-mortem examinations in the unfortunate event of other dolphin deaths, to understand factors contributing to disease and mortality
- promotion of river-friendly fishing practices, including biodegradable bait bags, and to support the recovery of tangled or broken fishing lines
- \$50,000 to expand the *Dolphin Watch* program, where volunteers are trained to identify individual dolphins and report their behavior
- establishment of a working group to investigate the ongoing health of the dolphins in the Swan Canning Riverpark. The group will include representatives of science institutions, government agencies and the community and will report to the Environment Minister by the end of the year.

The report is available at www.swanrivertrust.wa.gov.au and www.dec.wa.gov.au



(From left) Dale Harvey, Alena Kessel, Melinda Cartner, Michael Higgins, Chris Nutt, Barb Green, Professor Lyn Beazley, Ewan Buckley, Liesl Ludgerus and John Lloyd.

Chief Scientist visits DEC

DEC's Marine Policy and Planning Branch welcomed Western Australia's Chief Scientist Professor Lyn Beazley to their Fremantle base last month.

Professor Beazley arranged to visit the branch to seek further information on dolphin research being undertaken in the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park.

Senior Marine Conservation Officer Barb Green said that Professor Beazley had a strong interest in dolphin research in Perth and the community-based Dolphin Watch Program being facilitated by the Swan River Trust which aims to improve understanding of bottlenose dolphins in the Swan River.

"It was great to be able to provide Professor Beazley with an overview of my research efforts to date which includes identification photographs of bottlenose dolphins found in the marine park, some of which had sustained injury through what appeared to be boat strike.

"Research in the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park is being undertaken over a two-year period and will result in a catalogue of identification photos of dolphins. It will also result in DEC and Murdoch University having access to a spatial database of how the dolphins use the marine park."

Information collected through Barb's research will complement the Dolphin Watch Program and previous studies of dolphins in Cockburn Sound and may lead to a greater understanding of how bottlenose dolphins use the river and the south metropolitan coastal waters.

Professor Beazley congratulated Marine Policy and Planning Branch staff on their enthusiasm for the work they undertake to establish marine parks and reserves in Western Australia and was keen to be kept informed of the branch's progress over time, and the outcomes of dolphin research in the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park.