



**Wildlife Health  
Australia**

Wildlife Health Australia is the peak body for wildlife health in Australia.

[wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au](http://wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au)

Phone +61 2 9960 6333  
during business hours  
Monday to Friday

If you see any suspicious signs of disease or deaths in wildlife you can report it to the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline on **freecall 1800 675 888**

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## First management committee meeting



Bat virus and emerging infectious disease expert [Hume Field](#) (pictured) has been elected as the new deputy Chair of Wildlife Health Australia's board.

WHA's vision, mission, principles, charter and strategic plan were also reviewed at the March meeting in Sydney.

The new vision for WHA is 'Healthy wildlife, healthy

Australia’.

WHA’s mission is to develop strong partnerships to better manage the adverse effects of wildlife diseases on Australia’s animal industries, human health, biodiversity, trade and tourism.

The strategic plan focuses on three main areas: smarter surveillance; preparedness and response, and; research and knowledge.

The meeting also covered governance training, reports from project officers, a skills audit of the management committee, and the formation of an audit and risk committee.

“It was a very busy and productive meeting as the new management committee commenced its responsibilities in governing on behalf of the membership. Both days provided a good opportunity for the new committee members to learn more about Wildlife Health Australia, get to know each other, and learn about their role and responsibilities as members of the first WHA board,” said WHA CEO Rupert Woods.

Members of the Management Committee are:

- Mark Schipp - Australia’s Chief Veterinary Officer (Chair)
- Hume Field - EcoHealth Alliance (Deputy Chair)
- Andrew Peters - Wildlife Disease Association Australasian Section Chair
- Chris Hibbard - Zoo and Aquarium Association Executive Director
- Ian Roth - Chief Veterinary Officer NSW, nominee of the Animal Health Committee
- Pam Whiteley - Wildlife Health Surveillance Victoria

## **See us at the Wildlife Disease Association conference**

The international conference of the Wildlife Disease Association will be held in Australia for the first time in

ten years, from July 26 to 30 2015, on the Sunshine Coast.

It promises to be an excellent program, with speakers including William Karesh from EcoHealth Alliance, Rick Speare from Tropical Health Solutions, Rania Plowright from Montana State University and Thierry Work from the USGS National Wildlife Health Centre.

Wildlife Health Australia is one of the sponsors of the event, and staff members Rupert Woods, Tiggy Grillo, Keren Cox-Witton Sam Gilchrist and Karen Magee will be there. Please come up and introduce yourself to us at our display! WHA staff will also be speaking at the conference, with all of our talks during the One Health and PREDICT (Part II) session on the Thursday morning.

“We are keen to meet our existing members, and sign up some new members at the conference,” said Rupert.

More information is available from the conference [website](#).

## Bellinger River Snapping Turtle



*Pictured above: Bellinger River Snapping Turtle, photo credit Sam Gilchrist.*

Wildlife Health Australia is one of several

organisations supporting the investigation and response to the sudden death of more than 320 Bellinger River Snapping Turtles (*Myuchelys georgesii*) since February 2015.

The rare turtles, with a population estimated at 1,500 – 4,000, live only within some sections of the Bellinger and Kalang Rivers, located on the New South Wales north coast.

Dead and dying turtles were found emaciated with inflamed and swollen eyelids. A highly consistent set of lesions has been identified in the turtles examined. The lesions are acute and inflammatory, which is most consistent with the presence of an infectious or parasitic agent.

Unfortunately, no turtles have recovered from the disease. Despite extensive testing for a wide range of infectious and toxic agents, no conclusive cause of the die-off has yet been established.

“As with most wildlife mortality events, it is likely that there is more than one factor at play resulting in such a rapid spread of disease”, according to Karrie Rose of the Australian Registry of Wildlife Health.

Identifying all of the factors contributing to an infection can be complex.

The NSW Department of Primary Industries, Local Land Services and NSW Office of Environment and Heritage are coordinating the multi-agency response to the turtle deaths.

WHA has contributed expert advice to the incident management and diagnostic teams, and provided input into protocols and plans developed as part of the response to this event. WHA’s Sam Gilchrist performed field veterinary health assessments on turtles that were brought into captivity as an insurance population.

In addition, WHA has liaised with WHA coordinators across Australia, providing updates and gathering information on any potentially related events outside of NSW. Surveillance to date has shown that



the disease has not appeared in freshwater turtle populations outside the Bellinger River. WHA also ensured the Commonwealth Government Departments of Agriculture, Health and Environment were well informed throughout investigation.

The response team has now moved to a longer term focus of surveillance, diagnostics, containment, species recovery, and community engagement.

You can find out more on the Bellinger Shire Council [website](#), where there are detailed updates about the response to this event.

## Focus on bats



*Pictured above: A black flying fox, photo credit James Niland.*

A diverse group of people are coming together to talk about bat diseases, through Wildlife Health Australia's [Bat Health Focus Group](#).

WHA's Keren Cox-Witton described it as a “truly inclusive, One Health” group.

“We have wildlife carers, ecologists, veterinarians, epidemiologists, virologists, public health and biosecurity policy makers in the group. They are a fantastic bunch of people to work with, and very generous in sharing their time and expertise.

“There are real benefits from the communication and

in-depth discussion, which help build a national picture and shared knowledge of bat health issues in Australia,” she said.

The Bat Health Focus Group was established in 2004 as an Australian bat lyssavirus (ABLV) focus group, with membership mainly from government departments. It has since expanded to include a much wider range of stakeholders, and maintains an interest in ABLV as well as other bat-borne diseases such as Hendra virus and the exotic disease white nose syndrome.

WHA collates data on ABLV testing of bats in ‘eWHIS’, the national wildlife health database. The data is provided by state/territory WHA coordinators, CSIRO’s Australian Animal Health Laboratory, Queensland Health, and zoo hospitals and sentinel veterinary clinics. Keren works with the focus group to analyse the results and publish a twice-yearly summary report, ABLV Bat Stats, which is available from the WHA website.

She said bats are submitted for testing because of contact with a person or pet with the risk of ABLV transmission (e.g. a bite or scratch), or because the bat was behaving aggressively, or had neurological signs. “This means the sampling is biased. As ABLV causes illness and behavioural changes such as aggression, the bats sampled are much more likely to be carrying ABLV than a random sample of the bat population,” she explained.

Of the 432 bats submitted for testing in 2014, around seven per cent had ABLV. However surveys done in the early 2000s suggest the prevalence of ABLV in wild bat populations to be less than 1 per cent.

Keren noted that trends in ABLV statistics are often driven by increased reporting by the public as a result of publicity, and do not necessarily reflect what is happening within bat populations. Despite this, Keren says the data is very useful from a public health perspective.

She also said that we must not lose sight of the value

of bats to our ecosystem.

“They’re extraordinary creatures with a unique place in Australia’s ecology, and we need to look after them.”

## **Recommendations on environment biosecurity**

The Senate Environment Biosecurity Inquiry Committee handed down its report in May.

Amongst its conclusions and 26 recommendations, the committee supported the establishment of the position of Inspector-General of Biosecurity, with broad audit and investigation powers to examine the operations of the federal biosecurity agency, as originally envisaged by the Beale review.

The committee recommended that the Commonwealth Government work with state and territory governments to revise the National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement to improve the Agreement’s functionality.

It was also recommended that the Federal Department of the Environment work with the Department of Agriculture to develop and publish a national priority list of environmental biosecurity concerns and that both Departments review the adequacy of resources specifically required for the implementation of the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) and existing Threat Abatement Plans under the Environment Protection and Biosecurity Conservation (EPBC) Act.

The committee noted worrying evidence of a lack of funding to support scientific work, particularly relating to environmental biosecurity, and recommended that the Department of Industry and Science develop a strategy to address the current and projected decline in the level of scientific expertise relevant to biosecurity.

Wildlife Health Australia was one of many

organisations that made a submission to the inquiry. View the submissions and the full report [here](#).

## Staff travels

Wildlife Health Australia staff have again been clocking up the kilometres this quarter.

WHA's Tiggy Grillo attended the International One-Health Conference, along with a meeting on 'Geographical coordination of wildlife health surveillance', in Amsterdam in March.

CEO Rupert Woods took part in Animal Health Committee in Melbourne in April, updating members on the latest from WHA. Rupert and Tiggy also participated in a national surveillance and diagnostics business planning workshop in Melbourne the day prior.

Closer to home, in May Tiggy presented at the NSW Department of Primary Industries Emergency Animal Disease conference, in Pokolbin, and spoke on biosecurity and contingency planning at the Zoo and Aquarium Association learning and development workshop, in Sydney. Later in the month she attended a national workshop on avian influenza risk mitigation held in South Australia. Together with colleague Keren Cox-Witton, WHA provided input at wildlife health meetings in South Australia and NSW.

Sam Gilchrist travelled to the New South Wales north coast as part of the response to turtle deaths in the Bellinger River. (See item above).

Commenting on the Amsterdam conference, Tiggy noted that different countries each have their own approach to wildlife disease surveillance, but that many challenges were universal.

"It is really useful to pool ideas. Issues that were discussed included the collection of consistent data sets from diverse stakeholder groups and the need for better consideration of host population ecology as part



of disease surveillance objectives. For example, how many and which species to survey, when there are several options,” she said.

## Member profile - Kyle Armstrong



Wildlife Health Australia member Kyle Armstrong (pictured) has been involved in WHA’s Bat Health Focus Group for three years, but his interest in the flying mammal goes back 20 years.

Kyle completed his PhD on the Pilbara Leaf-nosed Bat and Ghost Bat in northern Australia and has finished three postdoctoral fellowships investigating the taxonomy and evolution of a wide variety of small mammals, mainly bats.

His research has taken him to northern Australia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Japan, and his current focus is the bats of Papua New Guinea.

“Bats looked like amazing creatures to me, and the more I learnt about them the more fascinating they became,” he said.

Kyle said his favourite bat is the Pilbara Leaf Nosed Bat.

“They are really fragile, so they are good species to remind people of the fragility of the environment. On the other hand they are robust little fliers and amazingly skilled at echolocation, so if people look after the environment, they can look after themselves,” he said.

Kyle said the bat has remained virtually unchanged for three million years, and is the last remnant of a marvellously diverse group of bats that occurred in Australia long ago.

Kyle is the president of the [Australasian Bat Society](#). He said the sharing of information between the Australasian Bat Society and other bat experts through WHA's focus group was extremely valuable, from both a public health and conservation perspective.

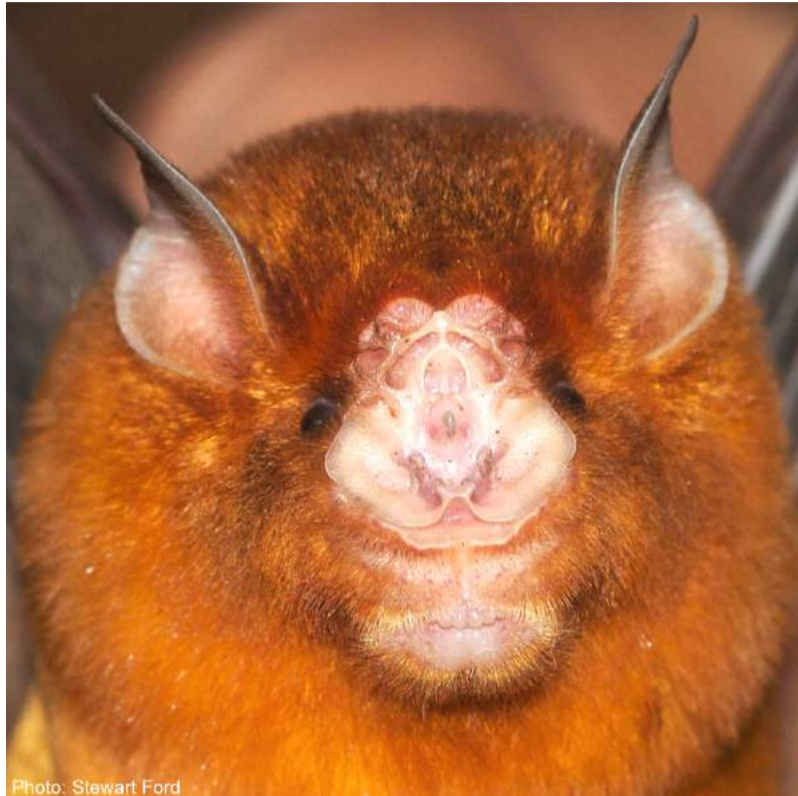


Photo: Stewart Ford

*The Pilbara leaf nosed bat, photo credit Stewart Ford.*

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