

Turtle expert's research reveals animal welfare issues at farm

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A green sea turtle in the wild. Credit: Michelle de Villiers

(Phys.org)—A world-renowned expert on amphibians and reptiles from Murdoch University is among an international team of researchers who are calling for a turtle farm in the Caribbean to be shut down after exposing serious animal welfare issues.

Dr Phillip Arena, who completed his PhD in reptile biology in the School of Veterinary and Life Sciences and is currently a lecturer in the Student Learning Centre at Murdoch's Peel campus, was invited to work with scientists at the [Emergent Disease Foundation](#) in the UK on an investigation into the [Cayman Turtle Farm](#) in the [Cayman Islands](#). The investigation concluded that the [farm](#) is unable to meet the welfare needs of the animals and threatens wild turtle conservation efforts in the

region.

Dr Arena was provided with video footage, images and other samples by the [World Society for the Protection of Animals](#) (WSPA) and found evidence of cannibalism among the [turtles](#), disease, captivity stress, [poor diet](#), overcrowding, unsupervised handling of the animals by visitors, neglect, birth defects and poor water quality. The resulting research formed the basis of WSPA's campaign to end turtle farming in the region.

"One of the turtles I assessed, a Kemp's Ridley sea turtle which is the rarest species of turtle in the world, was kept in such poor conditions that it was clearly dying a slow death," said Dr Arena. "I found evidence of limb trauma, [vitamin deficiency](#) and disease, the tank water was turbid and the turtle's shell was blanketed in an unnaturally thick layer of algae.

"The farm should be closed down because it displays no evidence of good science. The numbers of turtles they claim are being released back into the wild is grossly overestimated and none should be released anyway for fear of infecting wild populations.

"It's a sad fact that reptiles are able to withstand such poor conditions. To the inexperienced handler/owner, they often show very few signs of stress and disease until it is too late. Furthermore, a second part of our investigation examined the potential impact on public health due to contact with diseased animals, unclean water and the consumption of poor quality turtle meat."

Dr Arena's research has been highlighted in WSPA's campaign to get the turtle farm closed down. The organisation's online petition has received more than 100,000 signatures and celebrities like Sir Paul McCartney have voiced their support for the campaign.

However Dr Arena said the farm and the [Cayman Islands government](#) had been ignoring their concerns.

The farm was established in 1968 as a commercial venture to produce green turtles for human consumption. Turtle meat was once a popular food on the Cayman Islands but this is no longer the case Dr Arena said.

More recently the farm has become a tourist attraction housing 7000 [sea turtles](#) and hosting 500,000 visitors a year.

Dr Arena, his colleagues and WSPA are encouraging the farm to make the transition from a poorly maintained farm to a research and education facility focusing on the conservation of the region's turtle species.

Provided by Murdoch University

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