Helping a sea turtle that lost its dive

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Murdoch University vets worked with Perth Zoo to save a turtle suspected of swallowing plastic.

A juvenile green sea turtle discovered floating in an estuary in Broome has been brought to Murdoch University's Animal Hospital for a CT scan.

The turtle was flown to Perth around three weeks ago and has been under the care of Perth Zoo vets, who observed the creature – an endangered species – seemed unable to dive.

X-rays of the turtle were suspicious of free gas in the body cavity (coelom) so it was brought to Murdoch for the CT scan, which provides vets and veterinary radiologists with a more detailed look inside the body.

"The CT confirmed a large amount of free gas in the turtle's coelomic cavity," Murdoch University Veterinary Radiologist Shona Reese said.

"Based on the imaging findings, there was evidence of a torn left-sided ligament associated with the lung, while the right-sided ligament was intact. This likely resulted in the gas accumulation.

"This study was helpful to determine the intestinal tract was normal and not the source of free gas. These ligaments are a documented source of lung injury, which can lead to free gas, creating buoyancy issues for the turtle. These lung ligaments are unique to turtles."

Perth Zoo vet Dr. Alisa Wallace said plastics in our oceans caused problems for turtles who often mistook floating bags for a favourite food – jelly fish. But the plastic fragments could cause blockages.

"The initial scans have shown us there is an abnormal amount of gas in the turtle's body cavity which explains why it's not been able to dive. But we're not sure what is causing it yet, and detailed investigations of the scans are required," said Dr. Wallace.

"We're concerned there could be a blockage in the intestines."

Dr. Wallace said the single use plastic bag ban, which came into effect in Western Australia on Sunday 1 July, would make a difference to our marine habitats.

"Currently more than seven million plastic bags in WA end up in our water ways every year, and this has profound consequences for our oceans," she said.

"Hopefully the scans at Murdoch will help us to get a diagnosis on what is causing the floating problems for this particular turtle.

"We may need to perform surgery and it's possible that the damage is too bad to save the turtle. But hopefully we are able to get it healthy and back to the ocean."

Provided by Murdoch University