

Why Howzit Is Dying

By Ursula Keuper-Bennett

Turtle Trax, Canada

This is a sad story about green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*).

Green sea turtles all over the world are dying from a disease. The name of the disease has many letters in it. It is very hard to say. The turtle disease is fibropapilloma tumors.

Fibropapillomas are very serious. Turtles can die from them. When turtles have the disease they get ugly white lumps. These lumps are the tumors. Tumors grow on the soft body parts of turtles.

As the turtle gets sicker, more and more tumors grow. The tumors can get as big as a grapefruit. Tumors can grow over a turtle's eyes and blind it. Tumors can make it hard for turtles to swim and find food. Tumors make it much harder for a turtle to survive.

Here is a map of the world showing all the places where sea turtles with fibropapillomas have been found.



The places where sea turtles with fibropapillomas have been found

Some turtle scientists have noticed that the disease often shows up where the ocean water is bad. Ocean water isn't naturally bad. People make it that way by not being careful.

Many people are careless and let sewage go right into the ocean. They think the ocean is big and can hold a lot of sewage. Many countries treat the ocean like a watery garbage dump.

Animal sewage also gets into the ocean. Sometimes rain washes manure into a stream that runs into the ocean. Sometimes it runs into ditches that lead to the ocean.

Most farmers use chemicals to kill bugs and grow crops. When it rains, these chemicals can wash out of the plants and soil. From there it runs into ditches or streams. If this drains into the ocean, it is called run-off. This can be as bad for the turtles as sewage is.

Turtle scientists are finding many sick turtles around places where there are sewage and run-off problems. Many scientists are working hard to help turtles by telling people not to pollute the ocean.

This story is about one green turtle... but it is too late to help him. The turtle's name is Howzit. Howzit first settled down to live in Hawaii (a group of Pacific islands owned by the USA) in 1992.

Howzit made a bad choice. He made the water near Honokowai, Hawaii, his home. This is a place where there are lots of water problems. Even worse, Howzit decided to live with a lot of turtles who already had fibropapillomas.

This was bad because scientists think the disease is contagious. Contagious means "spread by close contact." Unfortunately, turtles sometimes like to be with

other turtles. When turtles get close together, they can catch contagious diseases from each other.

One place they get together is called a cleaning station. The turtles like to go to a cleaning station to get their shells cleaned. At a cleaning station, there are fish who like to clean turtle shells.



Poino, one of Howzit's friends, being cleaned by fish

This is a picture of Poino, one of Howzit's friends, being cleaned by fish. You can tell he really likes to be cleaned. He is sticking his head straight up to let the fish know he wants to be cleaned.

Another young turtle also came to live in the same area in 1992. The turtle's name is 4-Spot. We called her 4-Spot because her shell had four white spots on it. 4-Spot was very healthy when we first saw her in 1992.

Howzit grew well for a while. But here is Howzit in 1994, two years after we first saw him. His eyes looked strange. His neck had a small white spot on it. His shoulders had white spots. Sometimes when a turtle has these spots it means it is beginning to get the tumor disease.



Howzit in 1994

Only when the white spots get bigger and lumpy can you be sure a turtle really has fibropapillomas. Fibropapillomas often grow in the eyes first. We were worried about Howzit in 1994 - very worried.

In 1995 we were very sad to see Howzit. The small happy turtle we knew in 1992 was now very sick. There was no doubt he had the disease. We were surprised at how fast the disease was hurting him. He had tumors on both eyes.

His neck had a larger white lump now. Some of the white spots on his shoulders were now bigger lumps too. He had many tumors growing. Worst of all, Howzit was very, very skinny. He was so skinny his bottom shell, the plastron, was all shrunken in. It looked like he was starving.

He spent most of his time lying on the bottom sleeping. This is not normal for healthy happy turtles. Howzit was not healthy or happy. He was very sick.

Here are pictures of Howzit and a friend, and of 4-Spot, in 1995.



Howzit and another young turtle in 1995



4-Spot in July 1995

Yes, both Howzit and 4-Spot became really sick in just three years. That is why scientists are so worried about fibropapillomas. The disease can make turtles sick very fast. We didn't think Howzit would be alive when we visited the turtles again in 1996. We did not think Howzit had enough energy left to live until then.

People are working very hard to clean up Howzit's ocean. They are building basins to hold back storm water. They are trying hard to fix the problems with sewage. They know run-off should not get in the water. Sadly, it is too late to help Howzit. We never saw him again after 1995, and we believe he died from his illness. We hope other young turtles don't get the disease. We think about Howzit a lot and we miss him very much. We hope Vietnam's turtles are still healthy, and that they don't get the disease.

Many, many people care about turtles. Turtle scientists are working very hard in Hawaii and Florida (in the USA) to find what causes the disease. There are others who are fighting to improve Howzit's ocean. We hope one of you reading this

will decide to learn about turtles and the ocean.

You can become a turtle scientist just like the ones who work very hard to help the turtles. First you must work hard in school and learn all you can. Then you can become a marine zoologist or a veterinarian and try to find a cure for the disease



Sea turtles are splendid, beautiful creatures

Sea turtles are splendid, beautiful creatures. They deserve their place on this planet just like humans do. That means they need people who will speak up for them. Turtles cannot speak for themselves, so people have to do that for them. Turtles need all the help and all the friends they can get.

We hope that after reading this story, you will become a friend of turtles too.



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