

Turtle Euthanasia: A Multi-Step Process

Leslie Reed, DVM

leslie@wrcmn.org

- Most turtles are admitted to wildlife centers with some sort of trauma, majority HBC
- Many need to be EOA, but this can be a more complex process than mammals or avians
- Criteria for turtle euthanasia:
 - Severe head trauma +/- neurologic signs, comatose
 - Ocular trauma to both eyes
 - Organ evisceration, severe organ compromise
 - Multiple, severe shell fractures, especially if open, contaminated
 - Full (or partial?) limb amputation
 - Spinal trauma with loss of deep pain
 - Certain skeletal fractures (Scapula, Humerus? Femur?)
 - Joint luxations
 - Chronic issues (illness, failure to lay eggs +/- misshapen eggs, spinal trauma)
- Since turtles can breath hold for long periods of time, using gas inhalants is not an ideal option for sedation prior to euthanasia
- Injectable sedatives and anesthetics should be used to obtain a deep level of anesthesia prior to euthanasia
- Step 1: Sedate (IM/SubQ) – relaxes patient, IV access easier/less stressful for you and the patient
 - Alfaxalone
 - Midazolam
 - Ketamine
 - Dexmedetomidine

*may be able to skip this step if turtle presents comatose
- Step 2: Deeply Anesthetize (IV)
 - Propofol
 - Larger turtles – dorsal tail vein, jugular vein, occipital sinus
 - Smaller turtles – occipital sinus, jugular vein, subcarapacial sinus

*may be able to skip this step if turtle presents comatose
- Step 3: Euthanize (IV or ICe)
 - Euthasol, Fatal Plus
 - ICe if no venous access (takes longer)

- Step 4: Pith
 - Turtle brains have the ability to continue to function in the presence of anoxia = turtle could still be processing pain signals/suffering
 - Administration of euthanasia solution w/o pithing could potentially just be anesthetizing the patient (especially if promptly put in freezer...slow metabolism of drug!)
 - The brainstem must be inactivated/destroyed in order for all life systems to cease to function
 - Large bore needle inserted just below the bony protuberance at the base of the skull
 - Double check for all reflexes/signs of life before disposal or freezing. Fine to wait several hours.