Unravelling splendour of sex in the seagrass

IT’S sex ed for dugongs.
Researchers from the University of Queensland and Sea World have joined forces to develop strategies to accurately assess the reproductive status of wild dugongs in Moreton Bay.

Leader of the UQ dugong research team, Dr Janet Lanyon, said determining reproductive status of individuals is one of the most important factors for population modelling and effective management of a vulnerable species.

Field biologists will sample a selection of dugongs, which are representative of both sexes and from adult, sub-adult and juvenile size classes during the week-long study program.

Trevor Long, Sea World’s director of marine sciences, said the sampling involves lifting wild dugongs out of the water to take a comprehensive series of biological samples, measuring reproductive hormones plus an abdominal ultrasound to confirm reproductive state.

Dr Long said a specially designed stretcher would be used to cradle and lift the animals from the water onto the deck of the Sea World One research vessel.

“This is a very exciting study for us, and will allow us to capture comprehensive data never before collected,” he said.

The plan involves the capture of up to 30 dugongs in Moreton Bay over five days, taking about 30 minutes to sample each one.

Dr Lanyon said blood and urine samples are important because they enable biologists to measure hormone levels.

TESTING time . . . US biologist Bob Bonde and University of Queensland researcher Janet Lanyon with patient and, above centre an ultrasound of a dugong’s heart. Pictures: Steve Pohlner

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