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Darth Vader now sees the light side

Pioneering eye operation helps snapping turtle

By **SHARON LEM**, SUN MEDIA

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An elderly blind snapping turtle has been given his sight back in a first of its kind operation. Watch the operation.

"Darth Vader" has snapped back following a pioneering operation.

The elderly snapping turtle, aged somewhere between 50 and 75, is recovering at the Toronto Wildlife Centre following cataract surgery to its right eye.

On Aug. 15, members of the sailing Club Mimico near Parklawn Rd. and Lakeshore Blvd. called the centre to report that the turtle had not moved from its spot beside a parking lot gate in three days.

The rescue staff found it had lesions on its feet, there was dead tissue at the tip of its tail, its left eye was missing and its right eye had a cataract, said Nathalie Karvonen, the centre's executive director.

"Snapping turtles spend much of their time in water and they don't eat on land and need to rehydrate in the water, but he was lethargic and didn't move," she said.

Once treated for its lesions, the turtle was ready for cataract surgery. This type of cataract surgery is not known to have been tried before in a wild freshwater turtle.

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Snapping turtles are one of Ontario's seven at-risk turtle species. They're known to live up to 100 years.

Veterinary ophthalmologist Dr. Joseph Wolfer at the Animal Eye Clinic donated his time and operating costs to remove the cataract in an eight-hour operation Wednesday at his clinic.

"I've done cataract surgery on dogs, cats, birds and deer, but this was my first turtle and this was the biggest and oldest snapping turtle I've ever seen," Wolfer said.

"It was more difficult in that you can't lie him on his back or his side, so you have to turn his head sideways. But once he was anesthetized, I was able to get the cataract out fairly easily," he said, adding that the surgery was a success. "We kind of nicknamed him Darth Vader because of this low hissing noise he makes," Wolfer said.

Karvonen said the turtle will be kept at the centre until the spring, when he will be released into the wild.

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