



NOAA's Oil Spill Response

Rehabilitated Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles Released

What are we doing now?

On August 18, we are releasing 23 Kemp's ridley turtles, 22 of which were found offshore, moderately to heavily oiled. The other turtle was found on shore, and though not oiled, was debilitated and underwent rehabilitation.

Why are we releasing the turtles now?

The goal with any wild animal taken into captivity for care and treatment is to release it to its natural habitat as soon as possible. The turtles have been treated and cared for, and are healthy and ready for release.

From where were they rescued?



The 22 oiled turtles rescued from offshore waters were found between 40 and 60 nautical miles offshore of Destin, Florida (11 turtles) and Venice, Louisiana (11 turtles). The turtle that stranded on

shore was found in the Florida panhandle.

Who rescued the turtles?

All were rescued by teams working under the direction of the Wildlife Branch within Unified Command. These teams consist of dedicated sea turtle biologists from NOAA, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Geological Survey, Riverhead Foundation, and In-Water Research Group. They have

been supported by an expert group of captains and crews working within the Vessel of Opportunity program.

Where were they rehabilitated?

All previously oiled turtles being released today were cleaned of oil, treated, and cared for at The Audubon Aquarium in New Orleans and Gulf World in Panama City, Florida. After initial care and stabilization, they were moved to secondary rehabilitation facilities – Sea World Florida, Mote Marine Laboratory, and the Florida Aquarium. Other facilities assisting in this effort include the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies, Gulfarium, Clearwater Aquarium, and Disney's Living Seas.

Where will they be released and why there?

They will be released offshore of Cedar Key, Florida, back into the Gulf of Mexico. These turtles are at the size at which they transition from an oceanic to a nearshore life stage, and the Cedar Key area is home to many of this size and age.

How clean is the prey and habitat where they will be released?

There is no evidence that oil from the Deepwater Horizon incident ever entered the habitat in Cedar Key. The habitat is healthy, supports a healthy population of Kemp's ridleys and will provide all the elements required for their survival and growth.

(continued on back)





Are these turtles tagged?

All of the turtles had internal tags placed in a flipper. These Passive Integrated Transponders (PIT tags) are the same kind veterinarians place in dogs and cats. All turtles found stranded or captured during directed sea turtle research programs are scanned for PIT tags, providing a way to identify turtles throughout their life.

What is known about the life history of Kemp's ridley turtles?

Kemp's ridleys are one of five sea turtle species found in the Gulf of Mexico, and have been listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act since 1973. Juvenile and adult Kemp's ridleys are found in U.S and Mexican waters in the Gulf of Mexico, and along the Atlantic coast as far north as Massachusetts.

Young turtles use *Sargassum* habitat in offshore waters, but transition to spent most of their lives in shallow waters, where they feed mostly on crabs. They nest primarily along the northeast coast of Mexico, with some nesting in southern Texas. After migrating to nesting areas, they are known to return to foraging areas. Kemp's ridleys do not get as big as other sea turtles, but reach maturity earlier (approximately 12 years). While there is no way to directly age sea turtles, we estimate based on size that the turtles released today are 1-3 years old. We do not know how long Kemp's ridleys live.



How does oil harm turtles?

Young turtles use highly productive areas where ocean currents meet, known as surface convergence zones. Here, the marine algae *Sargassum*

grows and thrives at the surface, providing feeding and sheltering habitat. Oil has also collected in these zones, leading many of these small, young turtles to come into direct contact with oil. Oil covering their bodies can interfere with breathing, coat the eyes and skin, and can cause them to become stuck in the oil. Oil ingested directly or when eating oiled prey items may interfere with digestion or cause internal organ damage.

Are you still finding turtles in need of rescue/rehabilitation?

Since early in the spill, we have searched for turtles offshore and onshore. In recent weeks, the number of turtles requiring rehabilitative care has declined. We are now finding unoiled turtles in places where, before mid-July, only oiled turtles were found. Those we find with evidence of oiling are



lightly or very lightly oiled. The convergence areas we are examining now contain living, unoiled prey, with turtles actively feeding and behaving normally in most cases. Most turtles found offshore now are quickly examined by wildlife teams and released to their habitat.

What are the other threats to Kemp's ridleys?

The primary threat to the species is incidental capture in commercial and recreational fisheries, primarily by trawls not equipped with Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) and gillnets. A significant number are also caught on hook and line gear used on piers. The historically significant threat posed by poaching of eggs and nesting turtles has been greatly reduced by strong efforts by Mexico and the U.S.

Where can I find the latest figures on sea turtle strandings and captures?

See the fish and Wildlife Report at <http://www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com> or visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/oilspill.htm>.

Learn more about NOAA's response to the BP oil spill at <http://response.restoration.noaa.gov/deepwaterhorizon>.

To learn more about NOAA, visit <http://www.noaa.gov>. 