



Rehabilitated Sea Turtles Released into Gulf of Mexico Habitat

What are we doing?

On October 21, approximately 32 sea turtles will be released back into the federal waters south of Louisiana near where they were originally captured.

What is significant about today's release?

This will be the first group of sea turtles rescued from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill to be returned to the federal waters off Louisiana near where they were rescued. This marks a significant milestone in the recovery of the sea turtle habitat offshore. Up until now, we have

been transporting turtles to Florida where there was no evidence that oil from the Deepwater Horizon incident had affected the habitat. Therefore, we could ensure that the turtles would be returned to healthy habitat that would provide all the

elements required for turtle survival and growth. Based on significant improvements to Gulf surface waters since July 15, when the well was capped, we have determined that these surface habitats are suitable for the release of these rehabilitated turtles.

What species are being released today?

Today's release includes green, Kemp's ridley, hawksbill and loggerhead sea turtles. Kemp's ridley, hawksbill and green sea turtles are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, loggerheads are

currently listed as threatened. NOAA's Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently published a proposed rule to list the loggerhead as endangered.



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 now healthy and ready for release.

Where will they be released and why there?

The turtles will be released approximately 50 to 60 miles offshore of Grand Isle, La. These turtles are all at a size where they live in oceanic surface habitats. Young sea turtles in the Gulf of Mexico spend the early years of their lives associated with convergence zones, where currents meet and oceanographic features bring together floating mats of Sargassum algae. Sargassum mats provide protection for the turtles from predators as well as a variety of prey, including small crabs, snails and other creatures.

How many turtles have been rehabilitated and released?

More than 500 live turtles were rescued during the

(continued on back)





Gulf oil spill, with more than 400 brought into rehabilitation facilities in Louisiana, Mississippi and Florida. Approximately 100 that were very lightly oiled were able to be released immediately at their capture sites, after the well was capped. As of today's release, approximately 270 turtles have been released from rehabilitation. Approximately 130 turtles remain in rehabilitation facilities and will be released as they are given clean bills of health.

Who rescued the turtles?

All the turtles being released were rescued by teams working under the direction of the Wildlife Branch within Unified Area Command. The response teams were made up of federal, state, local and private partners who are dedicated to protecting threatened and endangered sea turtles. The turtles released today were rescued by teams from NOAA, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the Riverhead Foundation and the In-Water Research Group.



Where were they rehabilitated?

All the turtles being released today were rehabilitated and cared for at the Audubon Nature Institute in New Orleans.

Are these turtles tagged?

All of the turtles have 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.

How does oil harm turtles?

Young turtles use highly productive areas where ocean currents meet, known as surface converge zones. Here, the marine algae Sargassum grows and thrives at the surface, providing feeding and sheltering habitat. Oil

from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill 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?

In late September, the Wildlife Branch of the Unified Command determined that there was no longer a need for a directed rescue and capture program in offshore waters for oiled sea turtles. In the weeks prior to this, rescue teams found unoiled turtles in places where they had previously found oiled turtles. The convergence areas we examined contained living, unoiled prey, with turtles actively feeding and behaving normally.

What are the other threats to sea turtles?

The primary threat to the species is incidental capture in commercial and recreational fisheries, primarily by trawls not equipped with Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs), gillnets, and longlines. A significant number are also caught on hook and line gear used on piers; boat strikes are also a growing threat. The historically significant threat posed by poaching of eggs and nesting turtles has been greatly reduced and no longer constitutes a significant threat for these species in this geographic area.



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

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/oilspill.htm>

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

