



### Sea Turtle Rescue Program

The seven species of Sea turtles are threatened and endangered, highlighting the many pressing issues surrounding coastal development and ocean conservation. To help ensure that sea turtles have a future in our oceans, the South Carolina Aquarium uses its facilities to aid sick and injured sea turtles through its Sea Turtle Rescue Program. When an unhealthy sea turtle is found along the coast, it is brought to our Sea Turtle Hospital by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) where animal care staff can monitor and treat the animal in our state-of-the-art facility.

Sea turtles arrive with a variety of problems including bacterial and fungal infections, shock from being exposed to cold temperatures, and wounds from boat strikes and entanglements. A full-time veterinarian is on staff to diagnose each turtle, and with the help of hospital staff and volunteers, to provide treatments and rehabilitative care.

Once admitted into the Turtle Hospital, sick and injured sea turtles may receive given IV fluids, antibiotics, vitamins and other medications. Common procedures include surgery, x-rays, ultrasounds and endoscopies. Critical care may involve blood transfusions for those that are severely anemic. The average length of stay for a sea turtle in rehabilitation is 7-8 months. When a turtle is deemed healthy enough to survive on its own, it is brought to a local beach to be returned to the ocean where it can rejoin the wild sea turtle population and help to maintain the species through reproduction.

### Quick Facts

- Just after opening the South Carolina Aquarium in 2000, staff began working with SCDNR to take in live stranded sea turtles for treatment. Because of the lack of space and staff, some of the animals that required long-term care were transported to the closest rehabilitation facilities in North Carolina or Florida. Over time, the Aquarium expanded its medical capabilities to provide immediate and long-term care to turtles.
- The central location of the Aquarium on the South Carolina coastline provides a logistical advantage through which turtles from either end of the state can be handled with a minimum of stress. Additionally, the state's longer warm season allows for more cost-efficient rehabilitation efforts.
- The Charleston area has the largest in-state cluster of knowledge and technology required to rehabilitate turtles. The area has 3 four-year colleges and 1 medical research university that provide services and expertise to aid our conservation efforts, and numerous conservation organizations that provide volunteers and networking opportunities. Charleston is home to one of the leading researchers in sea turtle endocrinology, to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Office (responsible for sea turtle protection and research) as well as to numerous other marine research groups.
- The Aquarium receives an increasing number of turtles each year and houses these sick animals in a small number of backup pools away from the public exhibits. In 2003, the Aquarium received and provided medical care to nine turtles, that's compared to 19 turtle patients in December of 2010.
- With a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Aquarium officially established a sea turtle hospital in 2005, along with educational programs to promote sea turtle conservation. Additional funds for the hospital and outreach efforts were secured in 2006, and in 2007 the Aquarium hired a full-time veterinarian.
- The Aquarium held its first beach release on Edisto Island in April 2003. Edisto Mama, 270 pounds at release, was an adult female that was found floating in the surf. After 32 weeks of treatment, Edisto Mama was released into the wild to have another chance at producing offspring. Since that time, the Aquarium has successfully released 54 rehabilitated sea turtles.



- In 2007, a four year old boy from Caledonia, Ontario named Ethan fell in love with a critically ill Kemp's Ridley sea turtle named Wadmalaw while taking a behind-the-scenes tour of the Aquarium's Sea Turtle Hospital. Over the next two years Ethan was inspired to raise more than \$5,000 through fundraising activities such as garage sales, bake sales, and bottle recycling in order to help save Wadmalaw and other sea turtles in the Sea Turtle Rescue Program. To his honor, Ethan helped release his beloved sea turtle friend back into the wild in July of 2009.
- The release of an adult female loggerhead sea turtle named DeBordieu inspired citizens of DeBordieu Beach, South Carolina and surrounding communities to hold a fundraiser for the Sea Turtle Rescue Program which raised more than \$12,000. This fundraising endeavor ultimately set the stage for a grassroots fundraising effort of turtle nest protection teams along the coast and South Carolina United Turtle Enthusiasts (SCUTE) to raise over \$35,000 for a digital radiograph machine. The radiograph (x-ray machine) that Aquarium staff members use to treat, not only sea turtles within the Sea Turtle Hospital, but the entire animal collection at the South Carolina Aquarium!