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Note: Photos Available

Contact: Elizabeth Bender
(843) 579-8699
ebender@scaquarium.org

Brett Witt
(803) 667-0696
WittB@dnr.sc.gov

FIRST REHABILITATED PATIENT FOUND ALIVE AND WELL

Regional sea turtle survey recaptures first sea turtle ever rehabilitated by the South Carolina Aquarium

CHARLESTON, S.C. — August 20, 2010 — The long-term value of rehabilitating sea turtles was substantiated on July 5, 2010 when the first loggerhead rehabilitated at the South Carolina Aquarium was recaptured nearly 10 years after it was released from what has developed into a full-fledged Sea Turtle Hospital. This loggerhead, dubbed “Stinky” by the Aquarium’s animal care staff, was recently recaptured a few miles off central Georgia by the R/V *Georgia Bulldog* during a regional turtle trawl survey managed by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR). Between release and recapture, Stinky’s weight increased from 103 to 176 pounds and his length grew by five inches, which is a normal rate of growth for a juvenile loggerhead of this size.

The story of how this loggerhead came to the Aquarium on August 22, 2000 was detailed in the August-November 2000 issue of [Loggerheadlines](#). Briefly, “he” was found floating in Port Royal Sound, Beaufort County and picked up by SCDNR Law Enforcement. The turtle had a heavy barnacle load but no external wounds. After being examined by Sea Islands Vet Clinic on James Island, S.C., SCDNR transported the turtle to the South Carolina Aquarium for rehabilitation. Upon arrival at the Aquarium, Stinky was determined to be positively buoyant and classified as a “floater.” Initial supportive care (administered with guidance from the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center and the N.C. State University College of Veterinary Medicine) included antibiotic and vitamin injections, fluid therapy, and radiographs which confirmed internal gas pockets in the animal’s body cavity. After a short period, Stinky began to eat squid, a few crabs and a lot of mackerel. Following two months of treatment his overall health had improved, but his floating disorder persisted; thus, it became apparent that additional procedures would be needed to ultimately treat the floating condition.

On October 11, 2000, a team was assembled from the Aquarium and SCDNR, led by Dr. David Owens, a renowned endocrinologist with the College of Charleston, to perform a laparoscopy on the ill loggerhead. In this procedure, a small incision is made and an optic endoscope is inserted into the turtle's body cavity. Using this scope to visualize the interior of the body cavity, Dr. Owens was able to guide antibiotic-laced sterile fluids into the body cavity to treat the animal's internal infection and displace the air that was causing the turtle to float. The scope also enabled Dr. Owens to visualize gonads indicating the turtle was male, information not attainable from an external examination until a sea turtle reaches adulthood. A second laparoscopy was performed on November 15, 2000 and revealed great improvement of the internal condition and soon after, the loggerhead was cleared for release. On January 11, 2001, Stinky was transported to the warm waters off Fla. by SCDNR and released at the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge in Melbourne, Fla. (follow this [link](#) to the original 2001 news story about this release). For the next nine and a half years, his whereabouts and status remained unknown.

This story is a remarkable example of the success of rehabilitation, for which little data is available. While satellite-telemetry (which has been used by the South Carolina Aquarium) provides a means to gauge the initial success of rehabilitation and release, documenting long-term survivorship requires recapturing turtles which is not common. Stinky is only the second of 51 sea turtles to be recaptured following successful rehabilitation and release by the Aquarium, both of which were recaptured in the regional in-water trawl survey. Furthermore, because this turtle is a male that would not come ashore unless he stranded again, the odds were even more stacked against ever receiving a report on his whereabouts after he was released. Therefore, when Julia Byrd, SCDNR Biologist and Chief Scientist for the July 5-9 cruise, reported that he "looked fat and healthy and was very energetic when he was brought onboard," Sea Turtle Hospital staff were elated.

When Stinky stranded in 2000, his tail was very short (five and a half inches) and it did not extend beyond his shell, indicating that he was not a mature male. During the 10 years at large, it is very exciting to note that his tail grew eight inches to reach a length of over 13 inches. It appears that this turtle is close to or has reached maturity which would allow him to contribute reproductively. But, the significance of capturing a matured sea turtle is even more profound than adding one more adult to the population. As Dr. Owens explains, "Recapturing this turtle is an amazing and unprecedented opportunity to study a sea turtle in this part of the world that is transitioning through puberty, a critical life stage for the recovery of sea turtles that has never been properly studied." Thus, SCDNR is hopeful that the steroid hormone samples collected for Dr. Owens and other collaborators from this and other similar-sized turtles may help refine the estimates of the amount of time that must elapse before loggerheads fully mature.

In addition to highlighting the strong partnership between the Aquarium and SCDNR that now benefits many species statewide, this sea turtle's story also beautifully illustrates why patience is so crucial among those working to conserve and recover our state reptile, the loggerhead sea turtle. In the three decades that have passed since loggerheads were added to the Endangered Species List in 1978, nesting in the southeast, including S.C., has declined while in-water catch rates have increased. Because 90% of in-water collected loggerheads are healthy juveniles that are predominantly females

(determined from testosterone levels) originating from our region, these individuals, if they survive to maturity, may lead to an increase in the number of adult nesting females in the future.

So while we all wait with bated breath to see what the future holds for loggerheads along our coast, rest assured that SCDNR is doing its part to ensure accurate data is collected and available for making informed management decisions that affect the fate of loggerheads, and that the South Carolina Aquarium is making sure that every individual is given a fighting chance at survival. Together, SCDNR and the South Carolina Aquarium are working to educate the public on how each and every person can take part in protecting and conserving sea turtles for future generations.

Help us help sea turtles in South Carolina:

Lighting and habitat disturbance are detrimental to sea turtle nesting and hatchling emergence; thus, we recommend the following steps to minimize any negative impact on sea turtles on the beach:

- Obey local and county ordinances regarding lighting, flashlights, fireworks and bonfires.
- Do not disturb (touch, flash photography or light shining) a nesting sea turtle and please observe her from a distance.
- Turn off lights and close blinds and drapes on windows visible from the beach, dusk to dawn, May through October.
- Encourage your local and county administrations to enforce their lighting ordinances.
- Fill in your holes on the beach at the end of the day (i.e., adults and hatchlings can become trapped in holes dug in the sand).
- Remove tents, chairs, etc. from the beach and dunes each day that could obstruct a sea turtle nesting at night.
- Remove trash (especially plastic bags and balloons) from the beach that could be mistaken for food by sea turtles if it blows into the ocean.

Consistent with their name, sea turtles spend most of their life in the water; thus, here are a few recommendations to increase the survival of sea turtles in our coastal waters:

- While boating, look out for sea turtles that may be in your path; mortality from boat interactions is on the rise.
- While boating, do not let litter blow out of your boat or help remove trash from the water that could be mistaken for food by sea turtles.
- If you spot an injured sea turtle on the water (or on the beach or in the marsh), call 1-800-922-5431 to report it.

For all media inquiries, please contact Elizabeth Bender at (843) 579-8699, ebender@scaquarium.org or Brett Witt at (803) 667-0696, WittB@dnr.sc.gov

About the [DNR Marine Turtle Conservation Program](#):

The DNR Marine Turtle Conservation Program is responsible for managing and protecting sea turtles in the state of South Carolina. This program has several all-encompassing components: management, monitoring, research, and education. More specifically, this program implements management techniques to mitigate activities that may impact sea turtles and provides training and support to more than 1,100 volunteers across the coast who protect nests and document sea turtles that wash ashore (strandings). DNR staff members also perform necropsies on fresh dead strandings and respond to live strandings in need of care. For more information visit: www.dnr.sc.gov/seaturtle/

About the [South Carolina Aquarium Sea Turtle Rescue Program](#):

To help ensure that sea turtles have a future in our oceans, the South Carolina Aquarium aids sick and injured sea turtles through its Sea Turtle Rescue Program. 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. Educational programs, outreach programs and behind-the-scene tours are used to educate the public about the plight of sea turtles and actions that can be taken to minimize threats to them.

About the [DNR Sea Turtle Trawl Survey](#):

For the past decade, the SCDNR has managed a federally-funded survey designed to evaluate trends in catch rates and health of wild sea turtles in coastal waters between Fla. and S.C. The regional survey is conducted by SCDNR and the UGA Marine Extension Service and involves dragging modified shrimp nets at about 500 randomly determined stations each summer. Since 2000, in-water sea turtle research managed by the SCDNR has collected, tagged and released more than 1,700 loggerheads between central Fla. and S.C. of which only 16 were previously tagged by another program and only another 47 (38 live, 9 stranded) have been re-sighted again in subsequent surveys. Low recapture rates in the various in-water surveys managed by the SCDNR are consistent with stable to increasing catch rates for loggerheads relative to several decades ago.

