



# LOGGERHEADLINES

Sea Turtle News from South Carolina

January - May 1999

## Greetings

Through this, our first issue of *Loggerheadlines*, we send you greetings for the 1999 sea turtle season. Many interesting things are happening. The first thing you will notice is the new format and design for *Loggerheadlines*. A special thanks to Charles Tambiah for the art work. This year we will be including more information, especially from the network members, in each issue of the newsletter. A new feature of *Loggerheadlines* will be a nesting update. These data are provided by the project leaders. The reporting dates may vary from project to project, but will provide more up-to-date information than available previously. We are also including news from around the region.

## Strandings

A total of 35 carcasses has been reported by the network so far this year. With the mild winter, it was not surprising to have turtle strandings in January, February and March. There were seven strandings in April, fewer than the 13 documented last year. This may be the result of virtually no trawling for whelks this spring.

There were 25 carcasses in May, including 15 loggerheads, four Kemp's ridleys

and six leatherbacks. This is fewer than the previous four years. One of the dead leatherbacks was an adult female that was tagged while nesting on a beach in Costa Rica.

Tom Murphy conducted post mortem exams on four of the seven leatherbacks that stranded this spring. One had a KMart plastic bag in her stomach, but was otherwise healthy. The others were in good body condition and had been actively feeding before they died.

Of the 22 loggerheads, only one was an adult size animal. Through June 12th, thirteen more carcasses have been reported. The total for the season is still lower than the previous three years.

## Leatherbacks

Each spring we conduct six aerial surveys at 1.5 and 3.0 nautical miles (nm) offshore, parallel to the coast. These flights are part of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Leatherback Contingency Plan. This year we counted 70 leatherbacks on our first flight, April 27. If more than ten leatherbacks are sighted per 50nm of survey line, the second part of the Contingency Plan is implemented, requiring shrimpers to open larger escape holes in their nets. However, they are also allowed to use a longer flap over the opening.

The second flight on May 3 documented 27 leatherbacks in concentrations that exceeded

the 10/50nm in the area bounded by 32 degrees latitude (Zone 32). This extends from the north end of Tybee Island, Georgia to the north side of Bulls Bay at Sandy Point on Raccoon Key. Shrimping season opened May 26. During a leatherback aerial survey on opening day, there were 405 trawlers working from the Savannah River to Winyah Bay. The restrictions in Zone 32 were in effect through May 28.

As the animals moved north, concentrations were seen that resulted in Zone 33, from Sandy Point at Raccoon Key to about Wilmington, North Carolina, coming under the same restrictions through June 11.

Those of you who attended the spring workshop in April will remember the discussion on the TED opening size. The legal opening is 12 inches by 35 inches, which is too small for sub-adult and adult sized loggerheads. The hope was that the larger leatherback openings would also protect the larger sized loggerheads. It seems they have.

Another concern was that the longer flaps might make it difficult for smaller turtles, like Kemp's ridleys, to push the flap away from the TED grid and get out before drowning. There have been six Kemp's ridley strandings already this year compared to a total of ten last year. This is worrisome, but it may be related to the recovery of the Kemp's ridley population. From June 1 through June 25, the National Marine Fisheries Service will be conducting tests in the clear waters off of Panama City, Florida to photograph smaller turtles exiting nets equipped with the longer flaps.

### **Nesting News**

About 6:00 a.m. on March 25, our dispatcher reported that there were two sea turtles on the beach at Hilton Head Island. Ed Drane went to investigate. A male loggerhead was "in pursuit" of a female. She had come ashore, probably to escape his "advances". The curve carapace length of this male was 58

inches! Yes, 58. The male also had a pale rectangular area on his shell with holes in each corner. It appears that a transmitter had been attached to him previously. We will be sending this description to the *Marine Turtle Newsletter* in hopes that some researcher will recognize him and provide us the information on where he has been.

On May 23<sup>rd</sup>, Meg Hoyle found a crawl on Botany Bay Island that seemed more narrow than most loggerhead crawls. However, due to boat trouble, she had not been on the beach for two days. During this time, the island had gotten rain, so she was not sure if the size of the crawl was due to aging. When she saw some people who were staying on the island, they told her about a nest laid around 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon. It was the same nest that had the narrow crawl. She will be keeping her eye on it to see what the hatchlings look like to determine if this is a Kemp's ridley nest.

### *Special Feature*

#### **Volunteers: Key to success**

The Sea Turtle Stranding & Salvage Network (STSSN) and the Nest Protection Projects provide invaluable assistance to sea turtle management in South Carolina. A majority of the persons participating in these activities volunteer their services. These programs render a great example of public dedication to sea turtle conservation, as well as collaboration between the public and a state agency.

Thirty-eight individuals monitor 26 sections of the our coast for strandings. Information collected from stranded turtles goes toward evaluating and implementing state and federal TED and other fisheries regulations.

Over 700 individuals participate in 19 Nest Protection Projects along the South Carolina coast. Ninety-seven percent of the participants are volunteers. They cover 50% of our coast and manage 67% of all nests laid in the state.

Project staff survey beaches daily, mark nests encountered, and protect them during the period of incubation. Information on the nests are compiled and their hatch successes calculated. This information assists the SC DNR in determining the statewide nesting picture for each year.

These projects also provide education to the thousands of people visiting our coast each year and conduct campaigns on issues such as beach lighting. A majority of the projects fund their own activities through the sale of products and collaborations with local organizations. Each project has developed its own organizational framework for carrying out their activities, with some of them being leading environmental groups within their communities.

In a recent survey of the projects, project staff made a series of recommendations that could assist in their activities, including increased communications. Therefore special attention will be made during the 1999 turtle season to facilitate these improvements.

As a first step, a network via email will be established between the project coordinators, SC DNR, and other collaborators. Increased exchange of information, training, and discussions are planned. A cooperative agreement between SC DNR and The Nature Conservancy has been established to facilitate these activities. The projects and SC DNR are collaborating with Charles Tambiah, who has experience with sea turtle conservation and community participation, to explore this wider initiative. The goal is to develop a coastal network of knowledgeable and skilled persons who can conserve South Carolina's sea turtles.

## Regional News

Florida - Dr. Blair Witherington with the Florida Dept. of Environment Protection reports that loggerhead nesting is very strong this season, leatherbacks are "blowing the top off all records" but green turtles are late and have not made a

showing yet. We also want to thank Dr. Witherington for allowing us to use drawings depicting the crawls of the three sea turtle species that could nest in South Carolina. Nest protection project leaders will find these in this mailing.

North Carolina - Ruth Boettcher, with the North Carolina Wildlife Commission, says, "We're cranking!". However, that state is having unprecedented numbers of strandings. They have already recorded over 200.

Georgia - Mark Dodd, of Georgia DNR, reports that after a fast start, nesting numbers are slowing down. They are currently about 10% ahead of last year.

## Notes on Folks

We have a celebrity in our midst now. Mary Ellen Rogers, Project Leader for Sullivans Island and the Isle of Palms, conducted an interview on National Public Radio about the sea turtle volunteer program here in South Carolina. This segment should air in July and we will try to notify everyone if NPR gives us an exact date.

Bob Joyner, manager of Yawkey Wildlife Center is graciously allowing one of his employees, Stacey Floyd, to conduct the nesting protection project after other qualified interns were unavailable for the length of time needed.

Assisting Stacey will be Elizabeth O'Hara, a student from the Governor's School for Science and Mathematics. Elizabeth will be conducting her own study as part of her Governor's School requirements.

**From Joan Drews:** This will be my last effort at helping "birth" *Loggerheadlines*. After 14-plus years I'm retiring from my duties in the "Endangered Species" office. With the countless phone conversations we've had, I feel that many of you "turtle people" are friends and I'm sure I will miss the association. Thanks for all the support you have given this office over the years.

## Reminders

1. Be sure that you are using the most recent stranding data forms and marking the location of the carcasses on the maps we have provided. We will enter the latitude/longitude with our GIS based on your maps.
2. Very fresh carcasses should be reported immediately to our office and then kept cool, if possible. By fresh, we mean "edible".
3. If a carcass is smaller than 20 inches, it is unlikely a loggerhead. It is more likely a Kemp's ridley or a green sea turtle. Please call us about small sized turtles so that the species can be verified, and in the case of Kemp's ridleys, scanned for PIT tags.
4. Remember to call in any strandings to our office as soon as you have taken the data and know the species.
5. If there are any questions, do not hesitate to call.

Thanking you for all of your efforts.....

Sally Murphy, State Coordinator,

Charlotte Hope, Biologist

and Charles Tambiah, Collaborating Scientist



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