



Contact: Shelley Dawicki
508-495-2378
shelley.dawicki@noaa.gov

July 28, 2014
SS14.07

Scientists Tag 19 Loggerhead Turtles off Mid-Atlantic Coast

A team of researchers, including staff from NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center, tagged 19 juvenile and adult loggerhead sea turtles in Mid-Atlantic waters during the May 27-June 1 project. The work is part of an on-going effort begun in 2009 to learn more about loggerhead turtle movements and behavior.

The team included Heather Haas, Henry Milliken, and Eric Matzen from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC)'s Woods Hole Laboratory, as well as researchers from the Coonamessett Farm Foundation (CFF) in East Falmouth, Mass. The research team worked from a commercial sea scallop vessel, the 91-foot F/V *Kathy Ann*, based in Barnegat Light, New Jersey.

"Our field work was timed to match the beginning of the turtles' migration into waters north of North Carolina," Haas said. "When we tag early in the migration, we can sample from a single location but still capture turtles that are destined for many different foraging areas."

The project, primarily funded from an award to CFF through the sea scallop industry's research set-aside program, provided an opportunity for the research organizations to collaborate in this year's project as they have in previous year's tagging work. The multi-agency Atlantic Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species (AMAPPS) initiative provided supporting funds.

Over the past six years, 111 loggerhead turtles in the mid-Atlantic have been tagged with satellite data loggers: 20 in 2013, 30 in 2012, 25 in 2011, 15 in 2010, and 2 in 2009. Many of the tagged turtles can be tracked on the NEFSC's turtle tagging web site at: <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/turtles/turtleTracks.html>

"Each year has been different, not just in the length of the cruise and the weather conditions but also in what we've been able to accomplish," Haas said. "This year we collected blood samples immediately after the turtles were captured. We wanted to know more about the naturally occurring stress levels in the turtles, and to do that we needed to collect the blood very quickly, before stress hormones related to capture could be released into the blood stream."

Aboard the F/V *Kathy Ann*, the turtles were individually weighed, measured, and biological samples taken. Each of the 19 loggerheads captured were then outfitted with satellite-linked data loggers, or tags, and with more conventional flipper and PIT (passive integrated transponder) tags, and then released back into the ocean. Most of the turtles were out of the water for less than an hour.

The satellite tags provide detailed information about turtle behavior at sea, especially in commercial fishing areas where juvenile loggerheads are the most common incidentally-caught sea turtle in fishing gear. The information gathered from the data loggers can be used to define areas where turtles are most at risk of encountering fishing gear.

Loggerheads, like all sea turtles found in U.S. waters, are protected under the Endangered Species Act.

The biological samples collected from the turtles for genetic and health assessment studies will also be analyzed to assess sex and foraging behavior. Some of the results will be available within weeks, while other findings will require months to produce. The tags, however, work from the time they are attached. Since large juvenile and adult turtles grow slowly, the tags could remain on these animals for many months, and possibly several years.

This effort was coordinated through the Northeast Sea Turtle Collaborative, the only team tagging turtles offshore in the Mid-Atlantic region.

#

Related links:

Sea Turtle Research at the NEFSC: <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/read/protsp/mainpage/turtles/>

Coonamessett Farm Foundation: <http://coonamessettfarmfoundation.org/>

Scientists Tag 20 Loggerhead Turtles off Mid-Atlantic Coast, Test Solar-Powered Tag:

http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/press_release/2013/SciSpot/SS1310/

Northeast Sea Turtle Collaboration 2012, 2013 & 2014 Turtle Tagging:

<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/turtles/turtleTracks.html>

Loggerhead Turtles: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/loggerhead.htm>

Atlantic Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species (AMAPPS):

<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/AMAPPS/>"