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## **14 Rescued Sea Turtles to be Released to Wild Today From Cape Cod**

*Joint effort of New England Aquarium, National Marine Life Center, NOAA Fisheries Service's Woods Hole Aquarium and Mass Audubon Sanctuary at Wellfleet Bay leads to largest release of sea turtles ever in the Northeast*

Fourteen sea turtles will line up this afternoon on a sandy beach and race down to the saltwater home they haven't seen for more than eight months. The event, the largest release of rehabilitated sea turtles ever in the Northeast, will take place on Dowse's Beach in the village of Osterville in Barnstable, MA.

Thirteen Kemp's ridley sea turtles and one loggerhead sea turtle will be released by rehabilitation partners including the New England Aquarium, The National Marine Life Center (NMLC) and the NOAA Fisheries Service's Woods Hole Science Aquarium. The sea turtles were found cold-stunned between October and the end of December in 2005, and were initially rescued by volunteers with the Mass Audubon Sanctuary at Wellfleet Bay. The turtles released today are from populations that are listed as endangered or threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act.

Late each fall, many juvenile sea turtles feed in Cape Cod Bay. Turtles are cold-blooded, so their bodies assume the temperature of the water around them. If there is a sudden weather or oceanographic event that quickly lowers water temperature, or if they fail to migrate south in a timely way, these turtles eventually become hypothermic and many strand on the bay side of Cape Cod.

The Mass Audubon Sanctuary at Wellfleet Bay seeks out and rescues these turtles along the beach and transports them to the New England Aquarium. There, they are slowly warmed and treated for complications of hypothermia, including pneumonia and bone and joint problems. Sea turtle stranding season on Cape Cod lasts from late October through December.

"For us, releasing back into the wild is the ultimate goal for all stranded sea turtles. To now have so many recovering, and being released in Massachusetts' waters, is a credit all the agency's involved," said Robert Prescott, director of the Mass Audubon Sanctuary at Wellfleet Bay.

"These are the first Kemp's ridley sea turtles we've rehabilitated for release at our clinic," said Kathy Zagzebski, NMLC President and Executive Director. "Saving these critically endangered animals is essential to ocean conservation. We're thrilled to be working along side institutions such as the New England Aquarium, Mass Audubon, and NOAA in the fight to save stranded sea turtles on Cape Cod."

"The Northeast stranding network partners do a great job caring for cold-stunned sea turtles. It's exciting to be able to release these animals all together," says Sara McNulty of NOAA Fisheries Service's Northeast Protected Resources Division. McNulty oversees the region's Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network, a federal program operated under the joint authorities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries Service. Four of the turtles to be released completed their rehabilitation at NOAA's Woods Hole Science Aquarium.

New England Aquarium biologists will attach satellite tags to five of the animals, including four of the Kemp's ridleys and the single loggerhead turtle. Connie Merigo, the Aquarium's Stranding Program Coordinator, explains that researchers "hope to use the data from the satellite tags to gather information about their post-release behavior, survival, migration and habitat, and to see how our rehabilitation techniques affect the turtles in the wild." The satellite tags will be attached to the turtles' shells, just behind their necks. The tags are small, and weigh just about a tenth of a pound. Physical identification tags are also placed on the turtles' flippers and just under their skin.

Veterinarians perform a few routine procedures on the turtles to prepare them for release, including physical examinations, blood tests and x-rays.

"The turtles have to meet normal behavior requirements in diving, swimming and feeding," says Aquarium Veterinarian Dr. Charles Innis, who is responsible for assessing the animals' health. "Some of the turtles have also had additional testing to determine that their medical problems are resolved. We've done ultrasounds, CT scans, and even nuclear scintigraphy on the animals with bone injuries." Nuclear scintigraphy is a procedure that involves the injection of a mildly radioactive drug into the bloodstream to highlight areas of the body with damaged tissue.

The rescue and rehabilitation of these turtles is prompted in large part by their endangered or threatened status. Kemp's ridley sea turtles are thought to be the world's most endangered sea turtles, and only a few thousand wild breeding females are known to exist. Kemp's ridleys are also among the smallest sea turtles, with adults weighing up to 100 pounds and reaching about 2 feet in length. Their range includes the Gulf coasts of Mexico and the U.S., and the Atlantic coast of North America.

Adult loggerheads weigh about 250 pounds and span about 3 feet in length. They can be found throughout temperate and tropical regions of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. Loggerheads, though wide-ranging and abundant compared with Kemp's ridleys, are considered threatened throughout their range.



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