

SOLSTICE RECOVERS  
AT SEAWORLD

PHOTO COURTESY: MIKE AGUILERA/SEAWORLD SAN DIEGO

## U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE TEAMS UP WITH SEAWORLD TO REHABILITATE RESCUED SEA TURTLES IN OREGON

**F**our sea turtles have been reported along the Oregon and Washington coast since November after becoming stranded in frigid Pacific Northwest waters. Unfortunately none of the turtles survived, according to Laura Todd, the Newport field office supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Todd says that the past few winters have been record years for strandings of sea turtles, in particular for the vulnerable olive ridley species.

The strandings have increased in recent years and are linked to an ocean phenomenon known as “the Blob” and warm El Niño currents.

Over the past five to 10 years, the USFWS has closely tracked turtle stranding numbers, and the agency has data that dates back to 1953, according to Todd.

When a turtle washes ashore, the Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network picks up the reptile. Next, preliminary care is done to stabilize the animal, which can take place at the Seaside Aquarium, Portland State University or Oregon State University — or the animal can be directly taken to the Oregon Coast Aquarium or the Seattle Aquarium.

Those two facilities are the only two permitted to rehabilitate stranded sea turtles by USFWS.

Before a rescued reptile is released back into the wild, USFWS requires every sea turtle recovered on the West Coast to complete the final stages of its rehabilitation process at SeaWorld San Diego. Todd says this step is necessary for turtles “because they need to be in warm water to be released, and our water is too cold for any cold stranded turtles.” SeaWorld is also the southernmost rehabilitation facility on the West Coast.

SeaWorld is still caring for a turtle named Solstice, found on Dec. 21, 2014, on the Washington coast. In April 2015, KLCC reported the female olive ridley turtle was

found cold-shocked on a beach, was cared for by the Oregon Coast Aquarium and was later transported by a coast guard flight to SeaWorld.

Solstice was projected to return to the Pacific Ocean in the summer of 2015, but the park became inundated with hundreds of rescued mammals and turtles, which impacted her rehabilitation process.

Sea turtles feed in open water and follow warm currents that take them hundreds and in some cases more than a thousand miles from the native waters like Mexico, according to Mike Price, curator of fish and Zoological Operations at SeaWorld.

“For some reason between roughly late 2013 and early 2016, there was a body of water off the Oregon and Washington coast that was multiple degrees above average for 2.5 years,” Price says.

The warm body of water, named “the Blob,” which is still being examined by oceanographers, shut down ecosystems and “provided an area for sea turtles that was comfortable,” but when it dissipated sea turtles became stuck in cold water off the Oregon and Washington coasts.

Add strong El Niño currents to the mix, and the reptiles trapped by these mysterious currents are left incapacitated or cold stunned.

“As reptiles, cold means slowing down, slowing down means less food, you’re not able to hydrate yourself, your organs start shutting down,” Price says.

For about twenty years, SeaWorld has rescued on average one turtle per year. Todd adds that SeaWorld released 45 turtles in 2016; some have been rehabilitated and others included several hatchlings born at SeaWorld after a couple of 50 year-old green sea turtles accidentally bred in 2009.

The park worked with USFWS and the National Marine Fisheries Service to ensure that the captive animals were

fed a variety of food and were removed from human contact in time to help acclimate the reptiles to life in the wild.

“As of now, we’re still tracking one turtle 127 days later and that animal is cruising the eastern Pacific about 600 miles off the coast of Mexico,” Todd says.

However, a full recovery for a rescued tropical sea turtle may not occur. Price says sometimes animals are too far gone by the time they are discovered — three turtles rescued in the past few years died due to their condition.

Cold-stunned turtles sometimes haven’t eaten in more than a month when found. And buoyancy issues arise for stranded reptiles. Price says small gas pockets called alveolus transmit oxygen and carbon dioxide from the bloodstream into the lungs and out through the throat and mouth, but when turtles become cold stunned the lungs become damaged and the alveolus are destroyed as well.

Today Solstice is in an 80 to 90 thousand-gallon tank with two other rescues, and Price says the move to this new pool is showing “some very positive early results.” The olive ridley turtle now weighs 54 pounds — she initially weighed in at 43 pounds in Feb. 2015.

Beachgoers are encouraged to be on the lookout for stranded sea turtles. Todd says that if you find a sea turtle, don’t touch it and try to stay with the animal until help arrives.

If rescued turtles survive, but can’t be returned to the wild, Todd says the American Zoological Association has rules to help determine where turtles will live.

She says facilities can request for turtles like Solstice to be kept where their rehabilitation began, which can educate “the public about stranding and about what happens to a turtle when it’s been exposed to really cold temperatures.” ■

*If you find a sea turtle, do not touch it. Call the Oregon State Police Tipline at 800-452-7888.*