

Sea turtle found fighting for life recovers at aquarium

By LYNDA V. MAPES
Seattle Times

The turtle had been floating helpless for so long, its head and shell were grown over with algae. Its body temperature had cratered, and it was so weak it could barely move.

Blown off course by violent storms, a sea turtle usually at home in warm seas off the coast of Mexico was found stranded Nov. 16 by a Makah tribal member on Shi Shi Beach, a remote and wild stretch of the tribe's reservation on the Washington state coast.

His quick thinking with a phone call to tribal and federal officials ignited a rescue effort starting with a 2 1/2-mile hike to pack the 40-pound turtle out from the beach. Once back at the tribe's village at Neah Bay, Clallam County, the trouble was far from over: All roads to the reservation had been washed out by the same storms that battered the turtle.

A private charter plane was scrambled to pick up the turtle and fly it to Port Angeles, where it met an animal ambulance from the Seattle-based marine wildlife research and rescue nonprofit SR3 for the drive to the Seattle Aquarium.

The turtle arrived at the aquarium Nov. 17, where a team of five launched round-the-clock critical care, beginning with a complete health assessment.

The turtle weighed about half what a teenage turtle of its size should. Its body temperature was only 48 degrees when it should have been around 75 degrees.

Blood tests and ultrasound examination of the turtle's heart, kidneys, lungs, digestive tract and flippers revealed an animal that had swollen muscles and a heart rate of only one beat per minute instead of the usual 14. The last meal it ate, probably close to a month earlier, was still in its digestive tract because its bodily systems had shut down in the cold water.

With the help of staff from the aquarium and SR3, the rescue team began raising the turtle's temperature by no more than 1 degree every four hours. Raise it too fast, and the warmth the turtle so needed could kill. The team also had to work to keep the turtle breathing.

It was a week before they dared give the turtle a name: "Shi Shi" (pronounced Shy-Shy).

On Nov. 19, aquarium staff gently loaded the turtle onto a float to try a swim in a tank of saltwater. It was one of the first times the turtle had been taken out of the pen set up in a locker room that could be kept cold enough to avoid heat shock.

Senior aquarium veterinarian Dr. Cait-



A rescued sea turtle, now named 'Shi Shi,' is lifted from a holding pool by, from left, Angela Smith, Dr. Caitlin Hadfield and Lindy McMorran at the Seattle Aquarium, where it's receiving critical care.

Alan Berner/Seattle Times

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lin Hadfield slowly withdrew the float and carefully let Shi Shi drift, supporting the turtle's head. The turtle blinked, took a few breaths, barely moved a flipper, as Hadfield scooped water with her hand from the tank and stroked it over the turtle's heart-shaped, green shell.

"She has gone from mostly dead to a little bit less mostly dead," Hadfield said. After a brief couple of turns around the pool, it was time for the turtle to go back to the pen and keep warming up, ever so slowly.

"It is a real privilege to work with sea turtles, we don't see them that often," Hadfield said. "They are beautiful animals, and very, very tough. If you can imagine a mammal trying to get through something like this, they would never survive."

Hadfield had hoped on her morning rounds that the turtle would be more active — but she was glad even to see the turtle alive.

Shi Shi was so fragile the turtle had to

be watched around the clock. "She is so weak," said Shawn Larson, sitting by the turtle's side for the night shift on Nov. 20. As curator of conservation research at the aquarium and the rehabilitation program lead, Larson is a veteran of long nights alone with fragile animals counting on her.

At that point, the turtle's temperature was still only about 63 degrees, and Larson was watching the turtle closely to make sure Shi Shi was still breathing.

"I already have a connection with her," Larson said. While they still don't know the turtle's gender for sure, everyone working with the turtle called Shi Shi a her.

"She is just really trusting us to do the right thing," Larson said. "She was lucky. Because from the first minute, everyone did."

To be washed up on a remote beach on a reservation still closed to the public because of the COVID-19 pandemic made it all the more remarkable the turtle was

rescued, Larson said. "I feel we are really giving her the best shot we can, and everyone is pulling for her."

The night shift goes quickly, Larson said, checking the turtle every 10 minutes and writing notes. And the turtle was lovely to be with. "They do have a calm, wise presence about them," Larson said. "We don't know the stories she could tell, what she has been through. We are just hoping we can save her life."

As of Friday, Shi Shi's condition continued to improve. While Shi Shi was still fragile, Hadfield was surprised and delighted to see the turtle taking longer swims, even diving to the bottom of the tank, resting a bit, and then resurfacing. The care team decided Shi Shi was strong enough to stay in the pool full time.

Green sea turtles are usually found in temperate and subtropical Pacific waters; this turtle was probably from the population that nests on the beaches of Michoacán, Mexico, Hadfield said. Because they can't regulate their own body temperature, when turtles are blown off course into Washington's chilly waters, they quickly get into trouble.

Sea turtles are at risk of extinction in their home waters due to a combination of threats, including climate change, being caught in fishing gear, being hit by boats, harvesting of turtles and eggs, loss and degradation of nesting and feeding habitat, ocean pollution and marine debris.

It took a big team of people, including the Makah tribe, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, SR3 and the aquarium to get Shi Shi this far — more than a dozen people in all.

The next milestone is the turtle being able to eat on its own. If Shi Shi continues to do well, the turtle will next be moved to a saltwater tank at SR3's facility in Des Moines, said Carey McLean, executive director and a veterinary nurse for the nonprofit. The next stop will be Sea World in San Diego, and finally, when the turtle is well enough and sea temperatures have warmed, release back to the wild.

"These turtles are threatened and endangered worldwide," Larson said. "It is important for this animal to get back into the population."

With winter not even officially started yet, there could be more strandings.

Anyone encountering a sea turtle or marine mammal in trouble on the beach should keep children and pets away. Do not touch the animal, keep quiet so as not to stress the animal and call the West Coast Marine Mammal Stranding Network at 866-767-6144.

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