

'Purple Heart' Sea Turtle Released Back into the Atlantic Ocean

Rehabilitated Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Now Carries Satellite Research Tag

ON MEMORIAL DAY 2017, a juvenile Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*) was incidentally hooked by a recreational fisherman at the Ocean View Fishing Pier in Norfolk, Virginia. As a result, the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center's Stranding Response Team was called in to rescue the sea turtle.

The turtle, aptly named 'Purple Heart,' had the fishing hook removed from its esophagus. The turtle was under sedation and the procedure was completed with no complications. Upon successful recovery, the turtle was not only cleared for release, but also for satellite tagging.

Trish Carrier, the annual fund manager for the aquarium and a spouse of a retired U.S. Marine, reached out to find a Purple Heart recipient who would be available to help with the release.

"Things worked out perfectly on the U.S. Marine Corps side, as my

husband knew at least one Purple Heart recipient that worked on Fort Story," said Carrier. "Everything fell into place in less than 24 hours."

Gunnery Sgt. Paul Worley, attached to Marine Corps Security Corporation Group at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story, volunteered to release the turtle back to sea on June 8 at the Virginia Beach oceanfront. Worley received the Purple Heart in 2009 after he was wounded during a tour in Afghanistan. He was joined by his wife and children who helped with the release.

"I have always felt that it is the responsibility of all people to take care of our planet. The ocean is probably the biggest part of that," explained Worley. "It gives me hope to watch a sea turtle swim out to sea that might have died if people had not intervened. There is a real possibility that this turtle will make it to adulthood and produce offspring."

"Hope is a powerful thing," continued Worley. "There have been times in my life where hope was all I had. And it always has been enough to see me through."

Worley and his family were excited to be a part of the sea turtle release since sea turtles are their favorite animal. The family went on to adopt 'Purple Heart.'

"Gunnery Sgt. Worley was a perfect fit," concluded Carrier. "It was wonderful to share such a special experience with the Worleys."

Prior to being released back into the ocean, 'Purple Heart' was tagged as part of a joint Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center Foundation (VAQF)/U.S. Navy research project. VAQF works with the U.S. Fleet Forces Command (USFF) and the Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) Atlantic to track juvenile loggerhead,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 27

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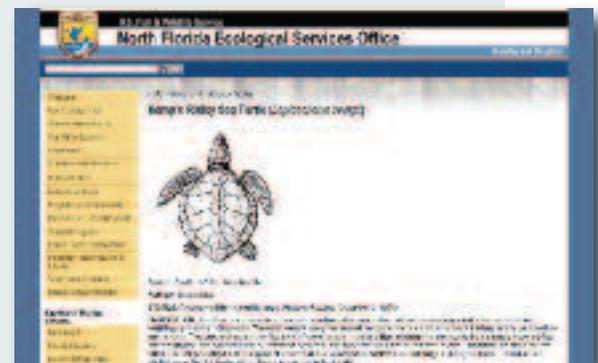
Gunnery Sgt. Paul Worley and his family are introduced to "Purple Heart" prior to its release back into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Basics About the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle

THE KEMP'S RIDLEY sea turtle has been on the endangered species list since 1970. A few of its unique characteristics include being the smallest of the sea turtles, typically nesting in mass nesting events and nesting during daylight. The relatively diminutive Kemp's ridley reaches only about two feet in length and about 100 pounds. Compare that to one of Virginia's more frequent nesters, the loggerhead turtle, which can average three feet long and weigh about 300 pounds.

Habitat information provided by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service notes the following:

- Outside of nesting, the major habitat for Kemp's ridleys is the nearshore and inshore waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico. Adult and sub-adult Kemp's ridleys primarily occupy nearshore habitats that contain muddy or sandy bottoms where prey can be found.
- Kemp's ridley hatchlings and small juveniles inhabit a very different environment than adults. After emerging from the nest, hatchlings enter the water and quickly swim offshore to open ocean developmental habitat where they associate with floating Sargassum seaweed. They passively drift within the Sargassum, feeding on a wide variety of floating items. Some of these juvenile turtles remain within Gulf of Mexico currents while others are swept out of the Gulf and into the Atlantic Ocean by the Gulf Stream.
- This developmental period is estimated to last approximately two years or until the turtles reach a carapace length of about eight inches, at which time these sub-adult turtles return to neritic zones of the Gulf of Mexico or northwestern Atlantic Ocean where they feed and continuing growing until they reach maturity. (Note: The neritic zone is the region of water lying directly above the sublittoral zone of the sea bottom.)



Source: www.fws.gov/northflorida/seaturtles/turtle%20factsheets/kemps-ridley-sea-turtle.htm

For More Information

FOR MORE INSIGHTS into the Navy's interaction with another Kemp's ridley sea turtle that nested at Naval Air Station Oceana's Dam Neck Annex—the northern-most nest of this species ever documented—read our article “First Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Nests at Dam Neck Annex” in the fall 2015 issue of *Currents*. You can browse the *Currents* archives at the Department of the Navy's Energy, Environment and Climate Change web site at <http://greenfleet.dodlive.mil/currents-magazine>.



You can track 'Purple Heart' and other tagged U.S. Navy sea turtles by visiting www.seaturtle.org/tracking/index.shtml?project_id=917.



Gunnery Sgt. Paul Worley releases “Purple Heart,” a Kemp's ridley sea turtle, back into the Atlantic Ocean.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

Kemp's ridley and green sea turtles by using a combination of satellite and acoustic transmitters. Funding for this work is provided by USFF, while VAQF and NAVFAC Atlantic analyze the telemetry data to understand how sea turtles use the Chesapeake Bay and coastal Virginia waters.

Currently, the U.S. Navy's understanding of sea turtle movement and habitat utilization in this region is limited. Further information on the movements, habitat use and seasonality of the sea turtles in this region will allow for a better assessment of the potential impacts that U.S. Navy activities may have on these protected species as well as design better mitigation measures to further protect these species. [↴](#)

All photos by Bobbie A. Camp.

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