

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Saving Sea Turtles

BP oil spill unravels efforts to protect the species already threatened by development and fishing bycatch

By **Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist** | Published on 08.23.2010

About a week ago, the first round of sea turtles rescued from [Gulf of Mexico muck](#) were returned to the sea. Twenty-three Kemp's ridley turtles were cleaned and nurtured by federal and state workers after being oiled by the [BP](#) spill. Released near Cedar Key, Fla., their future is uncertain. But they are the lucky ones.

There are seven sea turtle species in the world. Five of those inhabit the Gulf area, and all are threatened or endangered. They are ancient species with ancient instincts that don't mesh well with the modern world's development habits.

A typical 300-pound loggerhead, for instance, travels the world's oceans for 18 or more years before returning to her place of birth — probably the exact same beach — to lay eggs. She crawls out in the moonlight, digs a 2-foot hole and deposits 100 or so eggs. They hatch without her two months later, scratching their way up through the sand. They are thought to use the stars to navigate to the ocean, where those that survive predation begin their life's travels.

The species were threatened by beach development and fishing bycatch long before the spill. But in recent decades, volunteer efforts and mandatory regulations have coordinated to help mitigate these

threats. Then came BP.

The [National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration](#) predicted the possible effects of an oil spill on turtles in 2006: “While the probability of any given spill affecting sea turtles is low, even one spill — if it occurred at just the wrong time and place — could be catastrophic to one of these endangered species. Sea turtles are likely to be at greatest risk from oil spills, for example, when they are gathering in a particular area to nest, right after hatching, and when foraging in ocean convergence zones.”

In fact, hundreds have been found dead, floundering or covered in oil. Scientists don't believe the oil is a direct cause in all of these. Many turtles have been caught inadvertently on hooks — perhaps the result of shrimpers frantic to get in one last catch before the shrimp died or became unhealthy for human consumption. Oil or oil dispersants could have harmed the turtles, killed the fish and crabs they feed on, or driven them toward fishermen's bait. An algae bloom also may be a factor.

“Sea turtles can suffer both internal and external injuries from contact with oil or chemical dispersants,” said Elizabeth Wilson, a marine scientist. “In addition to regulating bycatch in commercial fisheries and protecting critical habitat areas, the U.S. government can now add ‘preventing future oil spills’ to its list of essential sea turtle protections.”

Seaturtle sightings are now uncommon in Southern California. Green sea turtles cause a scene when they're found swimming up the San

Gabriel River in Los Angeles, as they were a year or so ago. Leatherbacks find beaches on the Central Coast and Olive Ridley's come ashore in Marin County. Loggerheads occasionally frequent [Santa Cruz Island](#).

My experience with green sea turtles was in Costa Rica's [Tortuguero National Park](#) a few Octobers ago. In the span of two moonlit evenings, we were able to spy an aged female come laboriously ashore to lay a clutch of eggs, and then watch as dozens of newly hatched babies scramble through the sand to the Caribbean.

Tortoises and sea turtles have been around for millions of years. Oceanfront development and oil drilling notwithstanding, [John Muir](#) had it right when he observed that when you examine a single thing in nature, you find that "everything is all hitched together." As we've seen in the Gulf, that "everything" includes our thirst for oil.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*