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Oil Spill Clarifies Road Map for Sea Turtle Recovery

By Jane Lubchenco, Ph.D., under secretary for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA Administrator

Sea turtles have roamed the oceans for millennia. But in the course of just a few decades, hunting, coastal development, fishing, and pollution have driven their populations to dangerously low levels. Some, such as Kemp's ridley sea turtles, were beginning to make a comeback, thanks to efforts in Mexico and the US to protect their nesting beaches and reduce accidental entrapment in shrimp nets.

And then along came the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill.

Marine biologists feared the spill would be catastrophic for sea turtles in the Gulf of Mexico. And for good reasons. Five of the world's seven species of sea turtles live in the Gulf, and the spill coincided with nesting season for two of those species, the loggerhead and Kemp's ridley sea turtles. For the Kemp's ridley, the Gulf is the only known nesting ground.

For many years in the Gulf and around the country, these charismatic animals became the

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and other partners also collected dead stranded sea turtles to determine, when possible, their cause of death.

In August, more than a month after the well was finally capped, I had the pleasure of helping release the first rehabilitated sea turtles into Gulf waters where habitat was healthy. Of the more than 400 sea turtles brought into rehabilitation, more than 96 percent have survived. Over 300 of these turtles have now been released back into healthy surface habitat in waters off Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida. Some turtles with more severe injuries require longer rehabilitation. We expect that all the turtles will be returned to the wild.

While nearly all the rescued sea turtles were visibly oiled, to our surprise, most of the dead stranded sea turtles had no observable oil on their bodies and were in good health prior to their death. Necropsies (autopsies on animals) on more than half of 600 carcasses point to the possibility that a majority may have drowned in fishing gear. The evidence is that natural causes of death were ruled out, and that shrimp and fish – not a natural part of turtle diets – were found in their digestive tracts.

When NOAA became aware that a large number of stranded turtles may have drowned in fishing operations, we alerted state marine resource officials. In response, the Mississippi

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