

C O N T A C T

Southwest Region Interpreter's Newsletter

October - December, 1992

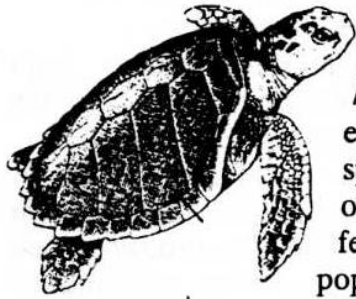
Vol XVII

Crossing Boundaries

Special Supplement
Sky Interpretation

Crossing Borders to Help Save the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle

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Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempi*) is the most endangered sea turtle species in the world, with only about 400 nesting females remaining in the population. During the last two decades, several agencies

from the United States and Mexico have combined activities to promote conservation and public education programs on behalf of this species. Padre Island National Seashore has actively participated in, and established, several of these projects.

Efforts to Establish a Secondary Breeding Colony:

In 1978, agencies from the U.S. federal government, state of Texas, and Republic of Mexico began a cooperative program to restore and enhance the Kemp's ridley sea turtle population. Nearly all nesting by this species occurs along a 16-mile stretch of beach near the village of Rancho Nuevo, Tamaulipas, Mexico. However, sporadic nesting has been reported from Corpus Christi, Texas to Veracruz, Mexico. A portion of the restoration program was a 10-year experimental attempt to establish a secondary breeding colony of this species at Padre Island through "imprinting."

During each summer, from 1978 to 1988, approximately 2,000 Kemp's ridley eggs were collected from Rancho Nuevo and shipped to the park for incubation. Of the 22,507 eggs received, 17,358 (77.1%) hatched and 15,875 hatchlings were subsequently shipped to the National Marine Fisheries Service Laboratory in Galveston, Texas for 9 to 11 months of captive rearing (termed "head-starting"). Overall, 13,454 of the head-started yearlings, experimentally imprinted to Padre Island, were released into the Gulf of Mexico.

Beach Patrols: To date, no turtles released from this project have been found nesting at Padre Island or elsewhere. However, it is unknown how many survived after release. Additionally, it is uncertain whether any have attained adulthood yet since at least 11-12 years may be required for females of this species to attain the minimum nesting size.

Seasonal beach patrols for nesting sea turtles, tracks, nests, and hatchlings were initiated by the park in 1986 and continue. The focus of these patrols is to identify whether Kemp's ridleys are returning to nest at Padre Island and to protect them and their offspring. Also, attempts are made to locate and protect nests laid by sea turtles that are not part of the restoration project (including Kemp's ridley, loggerhead, and green sea turtles). From mid-April through August, park and other local beaches are patrolled from 3 to 7 days per week. All-terrain vehicles, 4-wheel drive trucks, and surplus military vehicles are used to conduct these rigorous patrols. Numerous dedicated volunteers assist with the patrol program and these volunteers typically contribute over one-third of the 2,000 hours and 6,500 miles logged during patrols each summer.

Strandings and Rehabilitation: The park recently took the lead in efforts to detect and protect sea turtle hatchlings washed ashore ("stranded") on local beaches. During the last decade, more hatchling sea turtles have been found stranded along the beaches of North Padre and Mustang islands than any other area in Texas. Significantly more were located during the summer of 1990 than during previous summers. Forty (including 23 Kemp's ridley) were found alive, but, most were weak, injured, and in need of immediate care. Responding to this dilemma, the park instituted programs to detect and rehabilitate these small turtles.

Stranded hatchlings are extremely small and difficult to detect. Beach patrols have been modified to facilitate location of these animals. During the hatchling stranding season, patrols are conducted at slower speeds and patrol efforts

are concentrated in areas of previous observations. Public education programs, ongoing to solicit public assistance with reporting of nesting turtles and tracks, have been modified to include messages about reporting beached hatchlings.

Unfortunately, in 1990 there was no suitable local facility available where the baby turtles could be taken for care where their survival could be ensured. After coordination with John Miller (Chief, Resources Management, Padre Island) in early 1991, EXXON Corporation, USA, donated funding for the construction of a hatchling rehabilitation facility at the park. This facility is the first in the world designed specifically for the rehabilitation of stranded Kemp's ridley sea turtle hatchlings. It has the capacity to hold 70 turtles, each in an individual 20 gallon aquarium. Local veterinarians assist with the care of the hatchlings and those successfully rehabilitated are later released into the Gulf of Mexico.

Future Program Efforts: Since 1978, the park has been involved in a continuum of research, conservation, and public education measures to help save the Kemp's ridley from extinction. By increasing the chances of survival of individual Kemp's ridley turtles, park efforts may ultimately aid with the overall recovery of the species.

The NPS is now focusing efforts for this species on attempts to locate and protect nesting females (wild and head-started), nests, and stranded hatchlings. Staff at Padre Island are conducting extensive beach patrol and public education programs, both of which have been given high priority in the recently completed Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Recovery Plan. As directed by the Recovery Plan, Endangered Species Act, NPS mandates, and Padre Island Sea Turtle Management Plan, these programs will continue for the foreseeable future.

The Mexico Affairs Office--Connection in Las Cruces

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The dream of international resource management on the Mexican border is not a new one. From the days of Theodore Roosevelt, and possibly before, there were those who envisioned a time when great parks, such as our Big Bend, would span both the United States and Mexico.

The logic was obvious. Desert habitats and mountain ranges didn't begin and stop at political and international boundary lines drawn across the land. But logic and reality are not always the same.

For years, biologists, naturalists, and resource managers from Mexico had been trained at the best universities in North America and Europe. But that necessary link between training, awareness, implementation, and political will just wasn't to be had until the Mexican government decided it was time to act.

With the advent of the Salinas administration in 1988, change began at both the state and federal levels.

The state of Coahuila, with the direct intervention of Governor Mendoza, led the way in reawakening the latent dream of a great international park at Big Bend. Mendoza requested assistance from both the Mexican federal government and the U.S. National Park Service. The National Park Service was ready to join with Mexico in dialogue to try to realize the dream. Working with Mexico has taken on new dimensions and is not limited to Big Bend.

With a focused dedication to making a difference in our management of shared resources in Mexico and the United States, and to share our vision to preserve cultural and natural resources