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NOAA FISHERIES COMPLETES ANNUAL TURTLE EXCLUDER DEVICE TESTING
160 Florida Sea Turtles Returned to the Wild

Scientists from the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NOAA Fisheries) Panama City, Pascagoula, and Galveston Laboratories conducted their annual research into the effectiveness of turtle excluder devices (TEDs) from June 14 through June 25, 2004. The turtles used during the testing have been released into the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean.

A TED is a special component of a shrimp trawl that enables sea turtles to escape from shrimpers' nets while minimizing the loss of shrimp. Thousands of sea turtles drowned each year in shrimp trawls before the use of TEDs became mandatory in 1989.

Every year since the mid-1980s NOAA Fisheries has tested new and existing turtle excluder device designs in Gulf of Mexico waters near Shell Island, about one mile southeast of Panama City Beach, Fla. During the testing, divers observe and videotape sea turtles' behavior to document how well they are able to escape from TED-equipped shrimp trawls. Scientists and managers use the data obtained from this important research to determine whether innovative TED designs can be approved for use throughout the shrimping industry.

A key to the reliability of the research is that it entails the use of live, captive-raised loggerhead sea turtles. Each year about 200 two-year-old loggerheads that hatched in Florida and then were raised at NOAA Fisheries' Sea Turtle Facility in Galveston, Texas, are returned to Florida for use in the testing. On average, the turtles are 18 inches long and weigh 15 pounds.

"The loggerheads used for TED testing are not harmed in any way and are returned to the wild at the completion of the study," said research fishery biologist Ben Higgins. "We've always done everything possible to prepare these turtles for their reintroduction into the wild. All evidence indicates that they become fully assimilated into the wild stocks and don't suffer any adverse effects from being raised in captivity or used in this research."

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"When we complete the tests, we release the turtles in areas of the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean where wild turtles of the same size and maturity are found," continued Higgins. "Once released, the turtles begin seeking sources of food and may venture into passes and bays where crabs and other shellfish, the staple of their diet, are commonly found. This is natural behavior for young sea turtles and people should allow them to forage unmolested."

It is common for people to encounter sea turtles in areas that are popular recreational destinations like beaches, docks, and piers. However, it is a violation of the Endangered Species Act for people to take sea turtles. The term "take" means that it is illegal to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect sea turtles or to attempt to engage in any such conduct. Moreover, even small sea turtles will bite people and can inflict painful wounds if handled or provoked.

"Turtles that exit the water or appear to be experiencing difficulty swimming may have been injured," said Higgins. "People who see sea turtles that appear to be in distress or injured should contact the Marine Law Enforcement Division of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) at 1-888-404-3922. They will ensure that such turtles are examined and treated by qualified wildlife professionals. If people encounter a dead sea turtle on the beach, they should not remove any tags and should report its location immediately to the FWC."

NOAA Fisheries urges citizens to report fishery violations during weekly business hours of 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. EDT, to its Southeast Region Law Enforcement Division at (727) 570-5344, or after hours and weekends to its National Enforcement Hotline at (800) 853-1964.

This and other Southeast Regional news releases and fishery bulletins are available on the region's Internet home page: <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/>.

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