

Guacamole the sea turtle, who survived a shark attack, released in Cocoa Beach

Rick Neale, Florida Today

5-6 minutes

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CLOSE 

More than 200 people showed up to watch Guacamole, a 285 pound green sea turtle be released back into the ocean. Malcolm Denmark, FLORIDA TODAY

COCOA BEACH — Somewhere offshore, Guacamole the green sea turtle got seized in the toothy jaws of a large shark — and the predator mauled her front flippers and chomped her head, neck and carapace.

Maimed by the shark attack, missing most of her front right flipper, Guacamole floated and bobbed at the ocean surface long enough to lose roughly 100 pounds and fall ill to parasitic infection.

The emaciated turtle was carried like a cork in the currents to Cocoa Beach, where she washed onto the sand in February, helpless. But Guacamole got lucky: She was rushed to the Sea Turtle Healing Center at Brevard Zoo, where she underwent a seven-month rehabilitation stint.

Monday afternoon, Guacamole returned to the surf before more than 200 cheering spectators at Lori Wilson Park in Cocoa Beach.

"She was touch-and-go. And the question, unfortunately for her, was that laceration that went down to the bone in her good flipper. If we could not have saved that flipper — or if she had developed a terrible infection in that flipper — most likely she would have had to have been euthanized," said Shanon Gann, Brevard Zoo sea turtle program manager.

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Guacamole became the first adult green sea turtle released by the Sea Turtle Healing Center, which opened in April 2014 in Viera.

Brevard County Ocean Rescue personnel transported her from the parking lot to the surf's edge via a red Polaris Viking ATV. Then four green-shirted volunteers lugged her to the sea, rear flippers flailing in the air — her weight had rebounded to 285 pounds.

Guacamole bore a flipper tag in her left front flipper that survived the shark attack. Turns out she laid two clutches of eggs during the 2016 nesting season at Playa del Carmen, a popular tourist destination on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, Gann said.

Researchers estimate 20 percent to 35 percent of all U.S. green and loggerhead sea turtle nesting occurs at the nearby Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, which extends 20-odd miles between Melbourne Beach and Wabasso Beach.

Guacamole washed ashore Feb. 24 about 1/2 mile south of the Lori Wilson Park lifeguard tower. Brevard County Ocean Rescue Capt. Jason Jones responded to the struggling reptile, who had attracted a mid-day crowd of onlookers.

"It was just not looking good. It's missing its right flipper, just stuck on the beach — waves coming in, hitting it. Really making no attempt to go back out," Jones recalled.

"When they get distressed like that, they know their time is near," he said.

Volunteers with the Indialantic-based Sea Turtle Preservation Society transported Guacamole to Brevard Zoo. She only weighed 199 pounds.

"When she came in on our intake, I was here. And we saw her flipper tag from Mexico, and I thought she kind of looked like a big green avocado. But she was a little mangled from that shark — and I said, 'Well, she's kind of like guacamole.' And it stuck," Allison Turner, a zoo volunteer, said during a June Facebook Live broadcast featuring Guacamole.

Zoo staffers tube-fed the turtle gruel, treated her gastrointestinal parasite, and packed her lacerations with medication and honey. A pair of Rockledge nautical companies, Boaters Exchange and Ocean Fabrics, teamed up to craft a customized padded platform to support Guacamole's weight — her bottom shell had dangerously softened in her weakened state.

By April, the sea turtle started to eat squid and algae. By May, she resumed swimming, prompting zoo staffers to raise the water level in her tank. And in mid-June, with her weight up to 238 pounds, three volunteers muscled her into a larger, 9,000-gallon "deluxe suite" tank.

To commemorate Monday's event, the Cocoa Beach Caribbean fusion restaurant Tiny Turtle touted a unique offer: Take a selfie during the turtle release, then show us your photo for a free side of chips

and guacamole.

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