

Rescuers Save Rare Sea Turtle But Not Flipper

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MELBOURNE BEACH — Biologists amputated a flipper of one of the state's rare leatherback turtles Tuesday after the female was found caught in the rope of a crab trap in the Indian River.

The turtle, which weighs about 600 pounds, was taken to Sea World in Orlando late Monday. It had been found in the river about 7 miles north of Sebastian Inlet in south Brevard County.

Members of the Sea Turtle Preservation Society in Melbourne Beach paddled around the river in a canoe for several hours in heavy rain searching for the leatherback after a crab fisherman told them he had seen a turtle caught in a crab trap buoy.

"The rope was wrapped so tightly around her flipper it ate right down to the bone," said Wayne Stinnett, assistant director of the turtle society, who helped rescue the turtle. "I had the feeling they would have to amputate because there was just a big hunk of dead meat left of the flipper after she had dragged the trap around."

After most of the leatherback's right front flipper was amputated early Tuesday, Sea World general curator Frank Murru said he was uncertain about the fate of the turtle because leatherbacks heal slowly.

"It's too early to say if it will recover," Murru said. "This is the first leatherback we've ever treated for this kind of injury."

If the turtle recovers, it will be kept at Sea World for several months before it is released into the ocean, he said.

Stinnett said leatherbacks are the most rare of the endangered sea turtles that nest in Florida and have been seen in the state only in south Brevard and north Indian River counties. About 1,000 breeding pairs are believed left in the world; two leatherback nests have been found in south Brevard this year and four were documented last year, he said.

"As rare as leatherbacks are here, it's probably this same turtle that laid the nests this year and last," Stinnett said. "She probably would have laid more, but she apparently got sucked in the Sebastian inlet and hasn't been able to nest since."

Leatherbacks dive deeply in the sea and rarely come to shore except to nest on the beach from May to September.

"We've never heard of a leatherback being found in the river before," Stinnett said.

The turtle was first seen Saturday in the river south of Melbourne Beach when a fisherman noticed a red-and-white crab trap buoy in his territory marked by blue and white traps, Stinnett said.

When the fisherman saw the same trap again Monday, he investigated and found the leatherback with its flipper caught in the trap's rope. He then called the society, which immediately sent out a search party.

The turtle was found late Monday. It was too heavy to lift into the canoe so society members put the crab trap that was attached to it into their boat and slowly guided the turtle to shore, Stinnett said. It took five men to lift the leatherback from the water and onto the back of a truck that took it to Sea World, he said.