

Rehabilitated endangered sea turtle 'Wandering Wiley' released into ocean off Cocoa Beach

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Published 3:32 p.m. ET Jun. 16, 2021 Updated 4:13 p.m. ET Jun. 16, 2021



Wandering Wiley perked its head up, smelling the ocean for the first time since March.

Then the sea turtle headed home into the lapping waves.

Brevard Zoo Sea Turtle Healing Center staff had carried the reptile to the water and released it into the wild Wednesday around 1:15 p.m. at Lori Wilson Park in Cocoa Beach.

Wiley had been receiving rehabilitation care at the zoo's center for several months, and was the first public turtle release since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Zoo officials said a beachgoer found the Kemp's ridley sea turtle in a state of starvation on the beach March 11 and called Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. FWC got in contact with The Sea Turtle Preservation Society, which works with the Sea Turtle Healing Center, and Wandering Wiley was brought to the zoo's rehabilitation facility.



Kemp's ridleys are the smallest and most critically endangered sea turtle species. Adults are 2 feet long and weigh only 70 to 100 pounds. They generally live 30 to 50 years, and are usually found in nearshore waters of the

northern Gulf of Mexico, especially in Louisiana, but juveniles are also found in the Atlantic Ocean. The species is named after Richard M. Kemp, a fisherman from Key West who first submitted the species for identification in 1906, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

At the rehab facility, the turtle received fluids, vitamins, antibiotics, rest and a specialized feeding tube until it could eat on its own.

The turtle is too young for its sex to be determined, according to volunteers who helped rehabilitate it. They estimate it to be about 10 to 20 years old, which makes it a "sub-adult."

Faith Dunlap, 18, of Melbourne interned during the spring at the Sea Turtle Healing Center. She personally worked with Wiley "many, many times" to try to feed it with a pair of tongs when it wasn't eating on its own.

"It was a process," she said.

With a passion for marine life and a dream to become a wildlife veterinarian, Dunlap said working with Wiley was incredible.

"You try not to get attached, but I definitely got attached to Wiley," she said. "Don't tell the other turtles, but (Wiley's) been my favorite."

Jessica Patterson, the coordinator of the Sea Turtle Healing Center, said they were never able to figure out exactly what was causing Wiley's condition. But it didn't prevent them from proceeding with treatment.

"This turtle was generally debilitated," she said. "We don't know the reason why, but we just treated the symptoms, and there was no major injuries or anything like that."



Patterson said staff expects Wiley to thrive in the wild.

"We wouldn't release if we thought there was any chance of (Wiley) not doing well," she said.

Staff outfitted Wiley with devices similar to the microchips in dogs and cats. These devices will let others know that the turtle received care in the past in case it ever washes ashore again, said center volunteer Kristin Anderson of Melbourne.

Anderson said watching Wiley from the moment it arrived at the center to the release feels like a very "full-circle" moment.

"It's bittersweet, because Wiley has the best blue eyes, kind of like a Husky dog," she said. "But (Wiley's) ready to go."

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