

PRESS RELEASE
Harkers Island, North Carolina
March 6, 2014

NORTH CAROLINA FISHERIES ASSOCIATION
and
CARTERET COUNTY FISHERMAN'S ASSOCIATION

The commercial fishery has been, and continues to be, highly regulated regarding conservation efforts directed at sea turtles. However, there currently exists no comparable management, regulation, or oversight for the recreational hook and line fishery or boat strikes, both activities of which are recognized sources of illegal takes of sea turtles. With full knowledge of continued unlawful incidental takes of endangered and/or threatened sea turtles by recreational hook and line fishermen and takes from boat strikes, the National Marine Fisheries Service, US Wildlife Service, and the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries continue to allow, authorize, approve, and in some cases even license these activities which result in significant numbers of prohibited takes in violation of the Endangered Species Act.

Specifically, with knowledge of significant numbers of prohibited turtle takes in the recreational hook and line fishery and other resource uses, the National Marine Fisheries Service, US Wildlife Service, and the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries have focused conservation management and regulation almost solely on commercial fisheries, arbitrarily and capriciously assigning the full burden of species recovery to commercial fishermen.

The North Carolina Fisheries Association and the Carteret County Fisherman's Association believe that the National Marine Fisheries Service, US Wildlife Service, and the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries are, and continue to violate the Endangered Species Act by failing to respond to known threats to sea turtle recovery as well as authorization of such activities known to result in illegal takes. It is our belief that an accurate, in-water stock assessment will show these turtle species are at, or near recovery and strict regulation is unwarranted in both the commercial or recreational user sectors. Until that is accomplished, an equal allocation of conservation efforts and management across all user groups and activities which result in incidental takes is necessary and required under the Endangered Species Act to conserve and allow recovery of sea turtles.

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March 5, 2014

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RE: 60 Day Notice of Intent to Sue: Violations of the Endangered Species Act regarding Sea Turtles

Dear Recipients:

On behalf of the North Carolina Fisheries Association and the Carteret County Fisherman's Association, this notice of intent to sue is provided pursuant to section 11(g)

of the federal Endangered Species Act¹ (“ESA”) for violations of the ESA. By failing to properly utilize their authority to conserve, manage and regulate recognized marine environmental threats impacting sea turtle recovery, the U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Department of Interior, NOAA, USFWS, North Carolina Department of Environmental and Natural Resources, North Carolina Department of Marine Fisheries, and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (“the Services”) are in violation of the ESA.

Specifically, with knowledge of significant numbers of prohibited turtle takes in the recreational hook and line fishery and other resource uses, the Services have focused conservation management and regulation almost solely on commercial fisheries, arbitrarily and capriciously assigning the full burden of species recovery to commercial fishermen.

The commercial fishery has been, and continues to be, highly regulated regarding conservation efforts directed at sea turtles. However, there currently exists no comparable management, regulation, or oversight for the recreational hook and line fishery or boat strikes, both activities of which are recognized sources of illegal takes of sea turtles. With full knowledge of continued unlawful incidental takes of endangered and/or threatened sea turtles by recreational hook and line fishermen and takes from boat strikes, the Services continue to allow, authorize, approve, and in some cases even license these activities which result in significant numbers of prohibited takes in violation of the ESA.

Endangered Species Act

The Services have an affirmative mandate from Congress to use all methods and procedures to conserve protected sea turtles under the ESA. Section 2(c) of the ESA establishes that it is “... the policy of Congress that all Federal departments and agencies shall seek to conserve endangered species and threatened species and shall utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of this Act.”² The ESA defines “conservation” to mean “... the use of all methods and procedures which are necessary to bring any endangered species or threatened species to the point at which the measures provided pursuant to this Act are no longer necessary.”³ “Such methods and procedures include, but are not limited to, all activities associated with scientific resources management such as research, census, law enforcement...[and] may include regulated taking.”⁴

The Services have long known that the recreational hook and line fishery results in the unauthorized taking of sea turtles. Scientific data and research from NOAA Fisheries as well as state and private studies indicate illegal takes by recreational hook and a line fishery are equally, and in certain species, more detrimental to the recovery of marine sea turtles than other resource uses which encounter incidental takes. The failure of the Federal agencies to utilize conservation measures and address known illegal takes is in violation of Sections 2 and 9 of the ESA.

¹ 16 U.S.C. Section 1531 et seq.

² 16 U.S.C. § 1531(c)(1).

³ 16 U.S.C. § 1532(3).

⁴ *Id.*

Incidental takes of sea turtles are illegal unless exempted under the ESA

Incidental takes of sea turtles has long been recognized as a significant threat to the recovery of these protected species. The ESA makes it illegal for any person to take threatened and endangered species.⁵ Section 9 of the ESA prohibits all activities that cause a “take” of an endangered species.⁶ **“Take” is broadly defined by the ESA to encompass activities which harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, collect any endangered species, or attempt to engage in any such conduct.**⁷ Congress intended the term “take” to be defined in the “broadest possible manner to include every conceivable way” in which a person could harm or kill fish or wildlife.⁸

The ESA “not only prohibits the acts of those parties that directly exact the taking, but also bans those acts of a third party that bring about the acts exacting a taking... a governmental third party pursuant to whose authority an actor directly exacts a taking of an endangered species may be deemed to have violated the provisions of the ESA.”⁹ Accordingly, where the Services or individual states authorize activities, which result in the unlawful take of sea turtles, the Services and states are in violation of Section 9 of the ESA.

Pursuant to section 4(d) of the ESA, NOAA Fisheries has issued regulations extending the prohibition of take, with exceptions, to threatened sea turtles. NOAA Fisheries may grant exceptions to the take prohibitions with an incidental take statement or incidental take permit. (“ITP”). **Unless a particular fishery or activity has been properly exempted, any incidental take of sea turtles is unlawful and a violation of the ESA.**

Further, it is “to be the policy of Congress that Federal agencies shall cooperate with State and local agencies to resolve water resource issues in concert with conservation of endangered species.”¹⁰ In this regard, the state of North Carolina and all states in which protected turtle species are found, have a duty under Sections 2 and 9 of the ESA to cooperate with Federal agencies in using all methods and procedures to conserve protected sea turtles, including addressing activities which are known to result in unlawful takes of protected species. The failure of the state of North Carolina and other states in which protected sea turtles are found, to work with Federal agencies to conserve protected sea turtles by preventing prohibited takes, is a violation of Section 2 of the ESA.

All species of sea turtles found in U.S. waters are listed as endangered or threatened under the ESA and as such are protected by the take prohibitions set forth in Section 9. The prohibition on takes of sea turtles extends beyond the individual recreational

⁵ 16 U.S.C. § 1538.

⁶ 16 U.S.C. § 1538(a)(1)(B), (C)

⁷ 16 U.S.C. § 1532(19).

⁸ See S. Rep. No. 307 93rd Cong., 1st Sess. 1, reprinted in 1973 U.S. Code Cong. & Admin. News 2989, 2995.

⁹ *Strahan v. Coxse, et al.*, 127 F.3d 155 (1st Cir. 1997); 16 U.S.C. 1538(g).

¹⁰ 16 U.S.C. § 1531(e)(2).

fisherman or boater who directly takes protected species to those persons who permit or authorize activities which result in unauthorized takes.¹¹ Those states such as North Carolina, which authorize or license activities such as recreational hook and line fishing and boating, which are known to result in large numbers of illegal incidental takes of sea turtles, are also in violation of Section 9 of the ESA's prohibition on unauthorized takes.

No exemptions have been granted for takes in the recreational fishery or boat strikes

Sections 9 and 11 of the ESA authorize the issuance of regulations to enforce the take prohibitions. NOAA Fisheries may grant exceptions to take prohibitions with an incidental take statement or ITP issued pursuant to ESA section 7 or 10 respectively. To do so, NOAA Fisheries must determine that the activity that will result in incidental take is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the affected listed species. For some federal fisheries and most state fisheries, NOAA Fisheries claims it has not granted an ITP primarily because it lacks information about fishery-turtle interactions.¹²

The Services have long been aware of sea turtle takes in the recreational hook and line fisheries. Both the Department of Commerce (through NOAA Fisheries), and the Department of the Interior (through USFWS), are charged with administration of the ESA with respect to sea turtles. To help identify and guide the protection, conservation, and recovery of sea turtles, section 4(f) of the ESA requires NOAA Fisheries and USFWS to develop and implement recovery plans for U.S. sea turtle population. Each recovery plan outlines "management actions as may be necessary to achieve the plan's goal for the conservation and survival of the species" and "objective, measurable criteria which, when met, would result in a determination, in accordance with the provisions of [the ESA], that the species be removed from the list".¹³ To date, no sea turtle populations have been delisted or reclassified under the ESA.

In 1984, NOAA Fisheries and the USFWS approved a multi-species recovery plan for five species of sea turtles occurring in the U.S. This initial plan was followed by individual species plans developed by recovery teams for the U.S. Atlantic species in the early 1990's and the U.S. Pacific species in the late 1990's.

Each of these recovery plans, promulgated by ESA mandate, identify specific marine environmental threats to sea turtles. Among other threats, the recovery plans identify incidental "takes" by recreational hook and line fisherman and boat strikes as significant marine environment threats to the recovery of sea turtles. Despite recognition of these risks, based on the best science available, neither NOAA Fisheries nor USFWS have taken steps to manage or implement regulations concerning these threats.

¹¹ 16 U.S.C. § 1538(g)

¹² Federal Register, Vol. 75, No. 95, 2010.

¹³ ESA, Section 4(f).

Takes by recreational hook and line

Recovery Plan for Marine Turtles; 1984: (“1984”)

Section 1.6 of the 1984 Plan recognizes that turtle population losses from incidental takes are particularly costly to species recovery.¹⁴ In addition to incidental encounters with commercial fishing gear, at the time this plan was developed, its authors were aware of turtle takes “with baited hook and line, including sport fishing tackle.”¹⁵ Despite recognizing recreational encounters are a threat to species recovery, virtually all regulations and reporting requirements have been placed on the commercial sector while ignoring increasing incidental recreational takes.¹⁶

Recovery Plan for Atlantic Green Turtle; 1991: (“AGT”)

The species-specific recovery plans acknowledge that in addition to incidental encounters with commercial fishing gear, the recreational fishery is extensive and turtle takes on hook and line gear are not uncommon.¹⁷ Furthermore, the recovery plan requires that “[i]f any fisheries are found to result in significant take of sea turtles, regulations to protect turtles should be published by NOAA Fisheries or appropriate State resource agencies.”¹⁸

Bi-National Recovery Plan for the Kemp’s Ridley Sea Turtle; 2011: (“Kemp’s”)

In addition to bycatch in commercial fisheries, significant takes of this species occur in recreational fisheries.¹⁹ **Based on data from NOAA Fisheries and contained in the Kemp’s plan, an estimated 27,291 hard shell turtles were taken by recreational hook and line fishermen along the Gulf Coast, excluding Texas.**²⁰ The recovery team has noted that efforts are needed that would reduce the number of interactions with both recreational and commercial fisheries.²¹ Using the best science and data available, NOAA Fisheries scientists have determined that the recreational hook and line fishery results in an annual estimated mortality equal to that of the demersal gill net for which an ITP currently exists.²² Without regard for the equally lethal effects of the recreational fishery, the Services continue to burden only the commercial fisheries with observer coverage and incidental take permit requirements.

Recovery Plan for Leatherback Turtles; 1992: (“Leatherback”)

Several commercial and recreational fisheries incidentally take leatherbacks.²³ The fisheries known or suspected in incidental takes of this species include hook and line

¹⁴ 1984, p. 19.

¹⁵ 1984, p. 54.

¹⁶ 1984, p. 80.

¹⁷ AGT, p. 8.

¹⁸ AGT, p. 27.

¹⁹ Kemp’s p. II-13.

²⁰ Kemp’s, p. I-59.

²¹ Kemp’s p. II-13.

²² *Id.*

²³ Leatherback, p. 29.

methods.²⁴ The plan indicates that monitoring efforts are needed to determine the extent of incidental takes by fisheries type in U.S. coastal waters yet the primary monitoring efforts identified by the recovery team solely involve the commercial fisheries.

Recovery Plan for the Northwest Atlantic Population of the Loggerhead Sea Turtle; 2008: (Loggerhead”)

The Loggerhead plan recognizes that in addition to commercial fisheries, the recreational hook and line fishery is extensive, particularly in the Southeast United States.²⁵ NOAA Fisheries scientists have determined that aside from the highly regulated and observed commercial fisheries, recreational hook and line takes of loggerheads rank among the highest of bycatch fisheries.²⁶ Despite citing recreational hook and line incidental takes as a threat to the recovery of the Loggerhead Sea Turtle, all regulations and management efforts relating to incidental bycatch continue to be directed toward commercial user groups.²⁷

North Carolina recreational hook and line takes

Since 1997, North Carolina has monitored reports of sea turtle takes in its state waters through the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network. (“NCSTSSN”). In the period between January 1 and September 6, 2013, the NCSTSSN reported 28 strandings of endangered/threatened sea turtles which were directly attributable to the hook and line fishery²⁸; this is over 45% of all strandings reported during that timeframe. As no requirement exists mandating reporting of takes by recreational hook and line fishermen, either in North Carolina or other coastal states, these voluntarily reported numbers are believed to be much lower than the actual number of takes by recreational hook and line fishermen.

Takes by boat strikes

Recovery Plan for Marine Turtles; 1984: (“1984”)

In addition to incidental recreational takes, the 1984 plan also recognizes there is a “need to educate the boating public to reduce mortality from collisions”, with implementation modes placed on NOAA Fisheries and state agencies.²⁹ These implementation measures include the regulation of boating speeds in necessary areas.

Recovery Plan for Atlantic Green Turtle; 1991: (“AGT”)

Despite the acknowledgment that boat collisions with the Atlantic Green Sea turtle are not uncommon and happen in high frequencies in areas where recreational boating and

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Loggerhead, p. I-49.

²⁶ Loggerhead, p. V-11.

²⁷ Loggerhead, pp. II-78 through II-89.

²⁸ NCSTSSN reports.

²⁹ 1984, pp. 80, 81.

vessel traffic are intense, the Atlantic Green Sea turtle recovery plan makes no provision for implementation of recovery efforts dealing with this known threat.³⁰

Bi-National Recovery Plan for the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle; 2011: ("Kemp's")

From 1997 to 2001, stranding data indicated that 12.7% of stranded turtles were documented as having sustained injuries consistent with propeller and collision injuries from boats.³¹ NOAA scientists have determined that annual mortality for Kemp's ridleys as a result of boat strikes is by far the most detrimental to this species among analyzed resource uses. **Mortalities from boat strikes account for more than twice the number of estimated mortalities than any other non-fisheries resource use.**³² Yet, even with knowledge of this threat, the implementation plan makes no effort to manage or minimize boat strikes with sea turtles.

Recovery Plan for Leatherback Turtles; 1992: ("Leatherback")

Like the recovery plans of other turtle species, the Leatherback recovery plan notes that the species is vulnerable to boat collisions and propeller strikes when inhabiting near shore waters yet no recovery mechanisms are provided which address this known threat.³³

Recovery Plan for the Northwest Atlantic Population of the Loggerhead Sea Turtle; 2008: ("Loggerhead")

The Loggerhead plan notes that in recent years, 15-20% of live and dead loggerheads along the coastline of the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico had sustained injuries as a result of vessel strikes.³⁴ Analyzing the best science and data available, NOAA Fisheries estimates boat strikes as the second highest cause of mortality in the loggerhead species among non-fisheries related resource uses.³⁵

The plan calls for the development and implementation of a strategy to reduce vessel strikes acknowledging a significant problem in areas with a prevalence of sea turtles and high vessel activity.³⁶ Other than the 1984 multi-species recovery plan, the loggerhead plan is the only recovery plan which mandates consideration of measures such as protected areas, no motor zones, or speed regulations for specific areas with high turtle interactions.³⁷ While it calls for these studies and measures to be implemented as rapidly as possible to address this serious threat, virtually no such measures have been implemented to date.

³⁰ AGT, p. 9.

³¹ Kemp's p. I-60.

³² Kemp's p. V-14.

³³ Leatherback, p. 16.

³⁴ Loggerhead, p. II-95.

³⁵ Loggerhead, p. V-18.

³⁶ Loggerhead, p. II-95.

³⁷ *Id.*

Need for recreational fisheries observers

“The most effective way for [NOAA Fisheries] to learn more about sea turtle-fishery interactions is to place observers aboard fishing vessels.”³⁸ “[R]egular monitoring via placement of observers on fishing vessels is needed to gather data on sea turtle takes and, where necessary, to evaluate existing measures and develop new management measures in certain gear types and fisheries to implement the prohibition on take of sea turtles.”³⁹ In 2007, NOAA Fisheries issued a regulation (50 CFR 222.402) to establish procedures through which each year NOAA will identify those fisheries in which the agency intends to place observers.⁴⁰ These regulations specify that NOAA Fisheries may place observers on U.S. fishing vessels, **either recreational or commercial**, operating in U.S. territorial waters.⁴¹

The observer program design included how observers would be allocated among fisheries. The standard for assignment of observers came with the requirement that **“observers be assigned fairly and equitably among fisheries []”**⁴² Though the Services recognize the recreational hook and line fishery results in a number of takes significant enough to warrant the need for observation, they continue to place the burden of observer coverage squarely on the shoulders of the commercial fisheries, without regard for the data which indicates recreational takes are a significant threat to species recovery. Until NOAA Fisheries issues incidental take permits for the recreational hook and line fishery with the requisite observer coverage, every take of a sea turtle by this fishery is a violation of the ESA.

Need for new stock assessments

The ESA requires NOAA Fisheries and USFWS to determine whether any species is endangered or threatened.⁴³ When making these determinations, the ESA directs the use of the best scientific and commercial data available. To date, “no U.S. sea turtle stocks have an ‘adequate’ assessment.”⁴⁴ Historically, most sea turtle research has focused on the brief emergences of nesting females.⁴⁵ Virtually all data utilized in the multi-species recovery plan and species-specific plans are based solely on nesting data without regard for in-water assessments. **“While analysis of nesting female data is important, it is insufficient for a fully complete assessment.”**⁴⁶ Unless the populations are at equilibrium, counts of nesting turtles are an imperfect index because such counts reflect nest production decades earlier.⁴⁷ “Data from nesting beaches provides valuable information on females and reproductive output, but in-water monitoring and subsequent analyses are necessary[]”⁴⁸ to improve recovery assessments. “Without regular, high-

³⁸ Federal Register, Vol. 72, No. 149.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ 72 FR 43176, August 3, 2007.

⁴¹ Federal Register, Vol. 72, No. 149.

⁴² Federal Register, Vol. 72, No. 149.

⁴³ 16 U.S.C. 1533.

⁴⁴ Sea Turtle Assessment, 2013, p. 11.

⁴⁵ *Trends in catch rates of sea turtles in North Carolina, USA*; Epperly, et al. 2007.

⁴⁶ Sea Turtle Assessment, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Epperly, et. al. 2007.

⁴⁸ Sea Turtle Assessment, 2013, p. 13.

quality assessments, the [] ability to monitor species recovery will be curtailed and uncertainty may result in overly precautionary, or even counter-productive, decisions in regulatory, permitting, and interagency consultation processes.”⁴⁹

Summary

Even though there is no requirement for recreational anglers or boaters to report turtle takes by recreational hook and line or boat strikes, the numbers of documented takes in these user groups rivals many other resource use activities. Upon information and belief, the number of takes in both the recreational hook and line fishery and by boat strikes are much higher than actually reported due to the absence of mandatory reporting in these resource uses.

NOAA Fisheries has determined an accurate in-water stock assessment is needed to better determine turtle abundance in U.S. waters and thus evaluate species recovery. This cannot be accomplished without observation and regulation of the recreational hook and line fishery, particularly where the number of recreational hook and line fishermen continue to grow and already severely outnumber commercial fishermen.

By allowing and authorizing watercraft to travel at high speeds in areas frequented by endangered and threatened sea turtles, the Services are unnecessarily placing these turtles at risk of unauthorized killing, harming, and harassing of a protected species, further inhibiting recovery of protected sea turtles. Without adequate regulation of boating traffic in these areas and observer and reporting requirements, prohibited, unreported takes will continue.

We believe that the Services are, and continue to violate the ESA by failing to respond to known threats to sea turtle recovery as well as authorization of such activities known to result in illegal takes. It is our belief that an accurate, in-water stock assessment will show these turtle species are at, or near recovery and strict regulation is unwarranted in both the commercial or recreational user sectors. Until that is accomplished, an equal allocation of conservation efforts and management across all user groups and activities which result in incidental takes is necessary and required under the ESA to conserve and allow recovery of sea turtles.

If the Services do not act within 60 days to correct these violations of the ESA, the North Carolina Fisheries Association and Carteret County Fisherman’s Association will pursue legal action seeking injunctive and declaratory relief, as well as legal fees and costs for these violations. Until such time as an accurate in-water stock assessment is completed, an appropriate remedy that would prevent litigation would be for the Services to institute mandatory observer coverage and provide for an incidental take permit for the recreational hook and line fishery and restrict the speed and travel of watercraft in all areas frequented by endangered or threatened sea turtles.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at iv.

If you have any questions, or wish to discuss this matter please feel free to contact us. We look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,



Stevenson I. Weeks



Wesley C. Cooper

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This

radiograph from the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center reveals where a Kemp's Ridley, caught from a fishing pier, had swallowed two hooks.

Courtesy of Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center

(<http://www.seaturtlehospital.org/>)



Sometimes They Bite the Hook

Fish Eye News

Oct. 2010 Archive

You are on your boat with your line in the water and you are anxiously waiting for that big one to take the bait, when, all of a sudden, you feel the tug.

You just know you have a keeper on the end of your line when up pops the head of a turtle! Now, what do you do?

It's not a farfetched idea.

Sightings of turtles are a common experience, said Captain Joe Shute, with Fish Finder Charters and Captain Joe Shute's Bait and Tackle in Atlantic Beach.

"I see sea turtles about every trip where we go in the ocean," said Shute, who charts trips in the ocean and in the rivers and sounds.

While sightings and interactions are less common in the rivers and sounds, they do happen, Shute said.

"I've caught them on shrimp beside the turning basin on a two-hook bottom rig," Shute said.

Shute said he believes he is seeing more sea turtles now than in the past.

In one trip this past spring, Shute had already seen 15-to-20 loggerheads while fishing in the area of the Big Rock. On his way back to shore he saw even more.

"We saw close to 100 that day," Shute said. "We saw 50 within a two-mile stretch."

Dr. Craig Harms, a veterinarian for the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center in Topsail Beach, estimated that about 15 percent of the patients at the hospital come in with hook and line injuries.

According to the Rehabilitation Center's website admission records eight out of 22 admissions so far in 2010 involved hook injuries. Other injuries in recent years include disease, fractures, gill nets and cold stun.

The turtles are brought in from all up and down the coast, more often in the summer, Harms said. The hooks usually come from heavy duty gear, either from a commercial long line or big game fishing, but a few also come from fishing piers each year.

Harms, also an associate professor for N.C. State University College of Veterinary Medicine at the Center for Marine Sciences and Technology in Morehead City, said the severity of the hook and line injuries depend on how the animal is hooked.

"If they are not deep hooked, and the hook can be removed through the mouth, they can often be released immediately, or after only a standard course of antibiotics," Harms said. "If they are deep hooked, or require surgery, or cause internal damage, the rehabilitation process can be prolonged."

Line entanglements can complicate matters by wrapping around limbs and either cutting into the soft tissues or cutting off circulation."

Marine Fisheries - Bite Hook

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This

radiograph from the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center reveals where a Kemp's Ridley, caught from a fishing pier, had swallowed two hooks.

Courtesy of Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center

(<http://www.seaturtlehospital.org/>)

So what does an angler do if he accidentally hooks a sea turtle?

All sea turtles found in North Carolina waters are listed as either threatened or endangered species, therefore it is illegal to harm them in any way.

It is the responsibility of the angler to know how to carefully and skillfully release a turtle to reduce sea turtle injury and to promote post-release survival.

When Shute encounters a sea turtle at the end of one of his fishing lines he brings the turtle close to the boat and uses a long de-hooker to remove the hook.

Shute prefers not to bring the animal on board his boat; it would not only be dangerous for his party, but also for the turtle.

"Turtles aren't fast, but they have a good set of jaws on them and they can take a finger off quick enough," Shute said.

Long-handled de-hookers can be used with internal and external hooks. These tools are designed to engage and secure the leader, allowing the hook to be secured within an offset loop without re-engaging the barb during hook removal.

In cases where Shute cannot remove the hook, he cuts the line as close to the hook as possible, and releases the sea turtle without injury to himself or the sea turtle.

Harms agrees that anglers should be very careful dealing with sea turtles.

"Sea turtles are not overtly aggressive, but they won't be happy about the situation, and they have the biting equipment to cause serious injury to fingers if you aren't cautious," Harms said.

Anglers who are not comfortable removing the hook, can call the sea turtle stranding hot line at 252-241-7367 to arrange transport of the turtle where the hook can be safely removed and any necessary follow-up care can be provided, Harms said. In the meantime, keep the turtle cool and moist while awaiting transport.

Anglers who are comfortable removing the hook should only do so if they can see most of the hook in the mouth or hanging out of the mouth, Harms said. Removing hooks from further back can badly damage the softer tissues of the esophagus if not done appropriately.

Anglers should use needle-nose pliers or a dehooker to keep your fingers safe, but also use a piece of PVC pipe or a wooden handle as a bite-block, because if the turtle bites down on the thin metal of the pliers or dehooker, it can damage its beak.

If the turtle is deep hooked, call the sea turtle stranding hot line at 252-241-7367 to arrange transport to rehabilitation facility where the hook can be removed with the turtle under anesthesia.

In that case, anglers should not cut the line. Leave at least a few feet of line attached, coil it, and tape it to the top of the shell, Harms said. The line is very helpful point of attachment for hook removal later at the rehabilitation center.

If the turtle is deep hooked and landing the turtle is not possible, then the next best option is to cut the line as short as possible, Harms said. Hooks can pass through the gastrointestinal tract if the line is short enough that it cannot wrap around a flipper or bunch up in the gastrointestinal tract and the turtle stands a reasonable chance of surviving.

If an angler catches a sea turtle from a pier, he should land the turtle on the beach, Harms said. Anglers should not try to raise the turtle to the pier.

“Putting the full weight of the turtle on the hook and line will embed it very firmly and cause more damage than pulling it in laterally,” Harms said.

For more information on sea turtle release protocols from the National Marine Fisheries Service Southeast Fisheries Science Center, go to:

<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/pdfs/2008%20Updated%20Sea%20Turtle%20Release%20Protocols.pdf>
(<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/pdfs/2008%20Updated%20Sea%20Turtle%20Release%20Protocols.pdf>)

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N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources

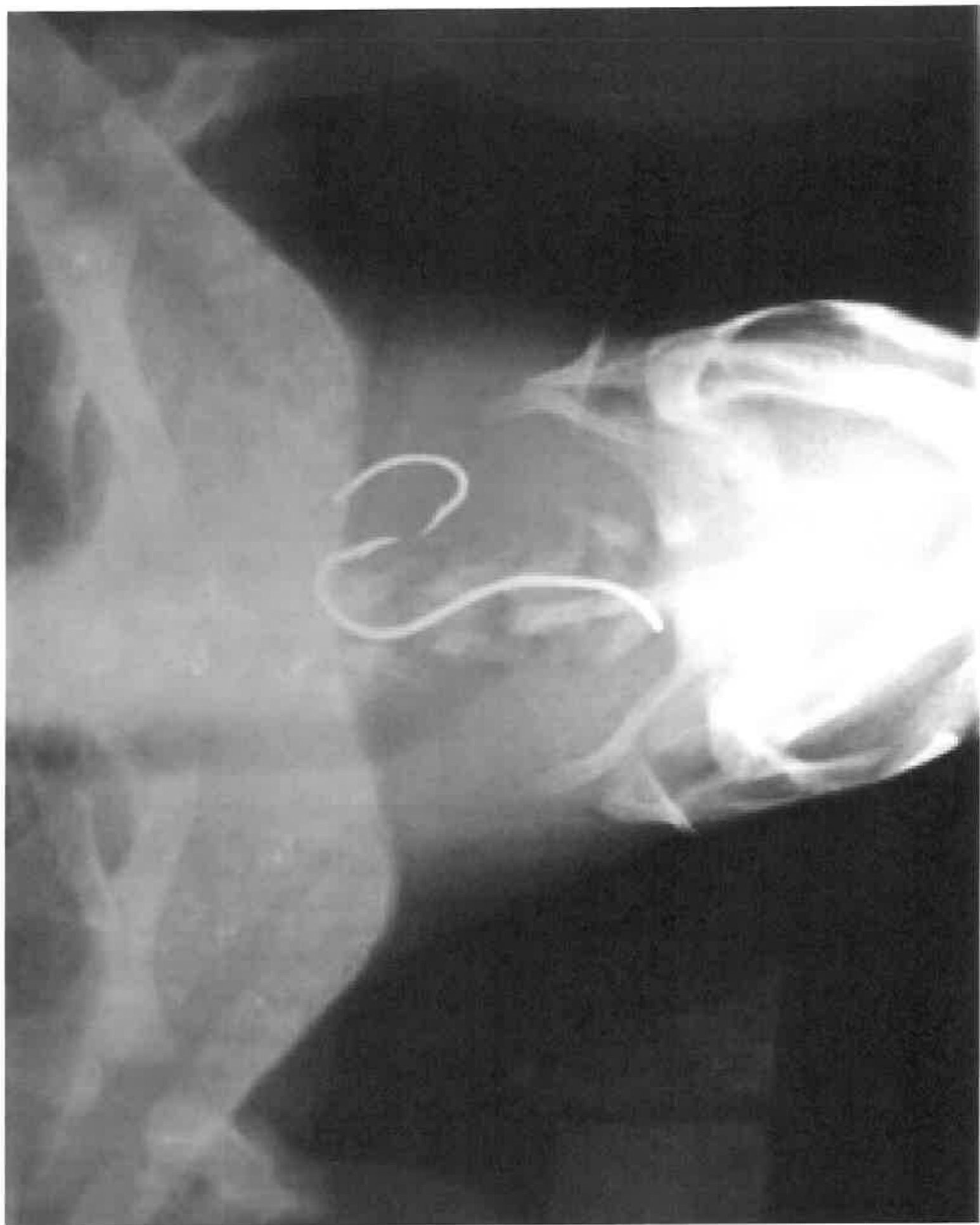
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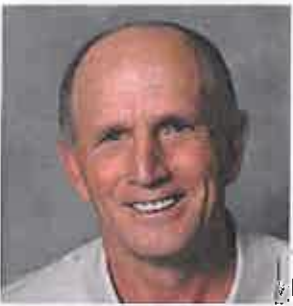
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SC Aquarium releases 3 sea turtles on Kiawah Island

Posted: Sep 19, 2012 10:26 AM EDT

Wednesday, September 19, 2012 10:26 AM EST

Updated: Sep 20, 2012 8:41 AM EDT

By Sandra Ecklund secklund@abcnews4.com

KIAWAH ISLAND, S.C. (WCIV) - The South Carolina Aquarium released three more sea turtles back into their natural habitat.

The release happened Wednesday at Beachwalker County Park on Kiawah Island. The three turtles, named Dewees, Murray and Hook, have been undergoing treatment at the aquarium's sea turtle hospital.

Dewees is a 90 pound juvenile loggerhead sea turtle that was found floating in Dewees Inlet near Charleston last April suffering from hunger, dehydration and anemia. With the help of antibiotics, fluids, vitamin injections and a healthy diet, Dewees gained 15 pounds and is ready to return to the ocean.

The other two turtles, Hook and Murray, are both juvenile Kemp's ridley sea turtles that were accidentally caught by recreational fishermen. Hook was caught off Myrtle Beach State Park while Murray was caught off Edisto Island.

They were both suffering from the same injury: both turtles had swallowed the fishermen's hooks. In both cases, the hooks were removed by staff veterinarian, Dr. Shane Boylan, who was able to do so with the turtles lightly anesthetized.

"All three cases involve people making the decision to help these turtles out," said Kelly Thorvalson, the South Carolina Aquarium Sea Turtle Rescue Program Manager. "It's a testament to the importance of community involvement in sea turtle conservation."

*The Associated Press contributed to this report

<http://www.abcnews4.com/story/19583652/3-sea-turtles-being-released-on-sc-coast>

