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Sea Turtles of Accomack County: Long distance travelers find not-so-happy endings on our shores

By Pamela J. Barlow

Ridley, Loggerhead, Leatherback, Hawksbill, and Green sea turtles. These are the names of the gentle giants that are finding themselves crushed, strangled, and stranded on our beaches. The most common species found stranded, the Loggerhead sea turtle, is federally listed as threatened in Virginia. In the past 5 years, Accomack County has seen 209 sea turtle strandings. The good news is that these numbers do not seem to be increasing. The bad news is that there have been 19 sea turtle strandings in our area so far this year.

Of the species of sea turtles found in Virginia's waters, 3 are endangered and 2 are threatened. Efforts to restore the populations of these turtles are centered through state and federal recovery management teams. Staffs at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and the Virginia Aquarium Stranding Team are first responders for Accomack County. If you find a dead or injured turtle in Accomack County, please call Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge at 757-336-6122. Biologists at the refuge can evaluate the turtle and take the next steps necessary to ensure the future protection of these species. With dead sea turtles, this involves taking measurements and painting the turtle's back orange or red to discourage illegal trade of threatened and endangered turtle shells. When C.N.W.R. Biologists find live turtles with severe injuries, they contact the Virginia Aquarium Stranding Team to transfer the animal to a rehabilitation facility. Sea turtle stranding occurs mainly as a result of commercial fishing boats and their gear striking or entangling turtles. Many boating companies sell fishing gear called "excluders" that prevent turtles and other large sea life from become injured or entangled. Most commercial fishing companies that use these environmentally friendly nets advertise that they do so directly on their product or on their website. Consumers wishing to help sea turtles and other large marine animals can do so by purchasing fish that is harvested through these companies.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has separate recovery plans for each of these sea turtle species. More information about sea turtles found in Virginia or other threatened & endangered species can be found at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service website, <http://www.fws.gov>