

Positively Ocean Episode: How Sea Turtles are getting a helping hand during winter months on the East Coast.

Liz Fox

(Music)

Liz Fox: Hi, this is Positively Ocean, where we celebrate the ocean and look at what's working well. I'm Liz Fox.

When government officials greet a private airplane packed with banana boxes at a Texas tarmac, you might imagine a dramatic showdown. But when Ben Higgins did that in 2014, it was a different story. Higgins is the Sea Turtle Program Manager at the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's Galveston Laboratory. In 2014, he received a shipment of cold stunned sea turtles from Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

Ben Higgins: I'm at the local airport here in Galveston. I drove out, flooded them into our van, and brought them over here and processed them. We weigh them and measure them. Our veterinarian takes a look at them, and they usually take an X ray to develop a course of treatment. They stay here until they're ready to be released.

Liz Fox: Cold stunning happens when water temperatures dip below 50 degrees Fahrenheit and turtles metabolism halts, leaving them floating and at the mercy of currents and winds. Cold stunned sea turtles are alive, but they're incapable of moving or eating on their own.

As rescuers innovate to improve turtles survival rate, sea turtles may fly more frequently. That's because more turtles are getting stranded on the shores of Cape Cod than ever before. This winter, about 200 volunteers have retrieved more than 400 turtles from Cape Cod's frosty seafoam. For the past 10 years, volunteers have recovered an average of 300, cold stunned sea turtles per year, up from dozens in previous years.

Scientists aren't sure if the increase is the result of successful efforts to protect nesting sites on sandy beaches in the southeast and Mexico, or the turtles are now attracted to the nutrient rich Gulf of Maine, which is warming faster than almost any other body of water on Earth. It may be a combination of the two factors, said Bob Prescott, the director of the Massachusetts Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. He's seen a dramatic increase in the number of sea turtles washing up over his career.

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Bob Prescott: Yeah, I found my first sea turtle in 1974, in the fall. It was kind of a big shock and away because I had never really thought about sea turtles being here in Massachusetts.

Liz Fox: The 2014 stranding stands out in everyone's mind. A whopping 1241 sea turtles were trapped in the bay and cold stunned. That stranding event tested the entire East Coast Sea Turtle Recovery Network, including aquaria and wildlife refuges from Maine to Mississippi and Texas. Again, Prescott:

Bob Prescott: But one of the critical links with turtles is we have so many up here and we don't have the capacity and the tanks.

Liz Fox: With the facilities available but too far away, the US Coast Guard and Air National Guard flew hundreds of sea turtles to host sites before the turtles could recover enough to return to sea, but the enormous task of safely transporting hundreds of turtles remained as their recovery progressed at different rates. That's when sea turtles began to fly in private jets, and they have Leslie Weinstein to thank for their bird's eye view of the Atlantic. Weinstein is a lifetime turtle advocate who protected turtle eggs when he was a boy in his native Florida. During his career as a general aviation businessman, he continued to participate in sea turtle conservation. He was in contact with conservationists in Massachusetts and Georgia when the mass stranding happened. His contacts in the aviation world were just what everyone needed. It was Thanksgiving, and he remembers it well.

Leslie Weinstein: While you were eating turkey, I was on the phone shipping turtles.

Liz Fox: Weinstein mobilized a then budding network of volunteer pilots who donated their time, skills, and equipment. Higgins, who received about 50 Kemp's ridley sea turtles, had plenty of room in his tanks in Galveston, Texas. He's no stranger to sea turtle rescues. This year, he led the rescue effort for a record 3663 cold stunned green sea turtles from Texas's mudflats after January's freezing cold snap.

Ben Higgins: We have a really good network of people on the Texas coast in getting people out there looking for turtles.

Liz Fox: Cold snaps in the Gulf of Mexico that stun green sea turtles are different from the gradually cooling fall season that slow down sea turtles trapped in the Cape Cod Bay. Those turtles typically spend months with little access to food and face longer recovery. Green

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sea turtles in a cold snap usually need moderate warming, a check up, a tag, and then they can return to nearby water when the weather conditions improve.

So, even during the biggest cold stunning event in Texas' history, the tanks at Higgins' NOAA lab and nearby aquaria did not reach full capacity. That means turtles stranded thousands of miles away can always catch a flight to a warm tank and professional care.

And that's an example of folks doing right by the ocean. Until next time, I'll be searching for all things Positively Ocean. For Ocean Currents and KWMR radio, this is Liz Fox reporting in Berkeley, California.

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