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### **Monofilament threat to turtles**

Fish line blamed for 71 reported fatalities last year

By KEVIN LOLLAR, The News-Press

The general cause of death was obvious — entanglement in monofilament line.

The exact cause will require a necropsy.

Maybe the hook at the end of the line tore a hole in the Kemp's ridley sea turtle's intestines or stomach; maybe it lodged in the back of the animal's throat so it couldn't eat; maybe the line that wrapped around the turtle's left flipper immobilized it so it drowned; maybe massive infection set in and killed it.



Photo by KEVIN LOLLAR/ The News-Press

In any case, the turtle died a slow, painful death.

Monofilament entanglement continues to be a leading cause of death for Florida's sea turtles and other wildlife.

Last year, 71 dead sea turtles were officially documented as monofilament victims, either after being hooked or simply being tangled in discarded fishing line.

But because about 90 percent of sea turtle deaths go unrecorded, monofilament might have killed as many as 700 sea turtles last year, said Allen Foley, an assistant research scientist at the Florida Marine Research Institute in St. Petersburg.

So far this year in Lee County, five sea turtles have officially been documented as monofilament entanglements, said Eve Haverfield, founder of Turtle Time Inc., whose volunteers monitor sea turtle activity from Estero Island to the Collier County line. One of the turtles survived.

“There seems to be an increase in entanglements, and there are turtles being entangled that we never hear about,” Haverfield said. “There is a lot of monofilament out there, along the shore line, hanging in mangroves. And then there are the carcasses. It's not the serene vision we have of our beaches or the back bay.”

Often sea turtles are killed when they take a baited hook, and the line is broken.

Haverfield advises anyone hooking a turtle to reel it in, if it's small enough, hang on to it, and call the Florida Marine Patrol or Turtle Time Inc. Removing the hook and releasing

the animal is not a good idea because it might need antibiotics to prevent infection from the wound.

If the turtle is too big to capture, the fisherman should cut the line as close to the hook as possible so the animal doesn't become entangled in the trailing monofilament.

Sea turtles are not the only monofilament victims.

"Monofilament is a huge problem for wildlife; it's outrageously bad," said P.J. Deitschel, veterinarian at the Clinic for Rehabilitation of Wildlife on Sanibel. "There's monofilament everywhere. You can go to the Ding Darling refuge and see carcasses of birds hanging in trees.

"You find barrels of discarded line in the mangroves. Ninety percent of the pelicans we get have been entangled in monofilament. We've seen everything from night herons, to great egrets, to great blue herons, to little tiny song birds, and what we get is just the tip of the iceberg."

While many sea turtles and birds are entangled when they take a baited hook, birds often become entangled by fishing line left by fishermen who have gotten hung up on mangroves and cut their line, despite a Florida law that prohibits discarding monofilament in state waters.

"Fishers get their line caught and cut it, then you've got a hook and line dangling, and a bird gets caught," Deitschel said. "It probably dies of dehydration. That can happen within a couple of days, but they can suffer for several days. It's a rotten death. If the bird is lucky, the line gets caught around its neck and strangles it.

"And now that it's baby season, if the adult gets caught and dies, then the babies starve to death."

Like sea turtles, birds caught by fishermen should be treated with care.

First, the fisherman should throw a towel over the bird's head, then fold the wings back and take it to CROW.

"A lot of people try to take the hook out, but that can cause problems down the road with infections," Deitschel said. "So cut the fishing line short and get the bird to us so we can gently ease the hook out. Think about getting hooked yourself and somebody wanting to yank the hook out of your arm."

Monofilament is a bane to Southwest Florida wildlife, and people need to become aware of the problems it causes, Foley said.

“Most people are probably environmentally conscious, and I don’t know what to do to reach the ones that aren’t,” he said. “Maybe if monofilament started killing people, their attitudes might be different.”

— Kevin Lollar can be reached at 335-0389.

### To help

To report a dead or injured sea turtle, call (800) DIAL-FMP or Turtle Time at 481-5566. For other injured wildlife, call Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife at 472-3644.

