

Venice Gondolier

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Turtle death attributed to wayward fishing hook

Somewhere in the area is a fisherman who landed a really big catch, and he doesn't even know it.

He did it without much effort at all, simply by casting aside some excess monofilament fishing line, with a good-size hook attached.

Then, while the fisherman sat back, the fishing line did its thing, totally unassisted, snaring a giant loggerhead turtle.

No one knows where or when it happened, but eventually the large sea creature ended up on Nokomis Beach. It may have used its last ounce of strength to swim ashore or, it may have washed ashore after it died.

"The turtle died two weeks ago," Mote Marine Laboratory spokesman Nadine Slimak said. "The stranding administrator said it was too bloated at first to do a necropsy but, after it decomposed, they found a fish hook in its esophagus and think that is the most likely cause of death."

The hook was attached to several yards of fishing line.

Life on the line

Every year several turtles and other sea creatures die from being ensnared in fishing gear or swallowing trash mistaken for food.

Recently released in Charlotte Harbor was a female bottlenose dolphin that had been treated at Mote for 56 days after becoming ensnared in monofilament fishing line. Nicknamed Toro, the dolphin will be monitored for 30-40 days by a radio tag and is doing well, Dr. Randall Wells, the director of Mote's Center for Sea Turtle and Marine Mammal Research said.

After being released and swimming from Bull Bay to Turtle Bay May 4, the dolphin was seen jumping several times, catching fish and interacting with other dolphins, Wells said.

Toro's wounds could have been fatal if left untreated. Fishing line had wrapped around its right pectoral fin, cutting through its skin and blubber down to the bone. The line could have sliced completely through the fin, leaving it susceptible to further infection and other problems.

Dr. Charles Manire, Mote's chief veterinarian, performed three surgeries on the dolphin to remove dead and infected tissue and fishing line.

"This dolphin's injuries are a reminder to the public that what they do on the water can have an affect on the wildlife they enjoy interacting with," Wells said.

So is the death of the sea turtle at Nokomis Beach.

Between 1985 and 2003, 343 creatures were recovered by the Stranding Investigations Program at Mote, with 217 necropsies performed. The cause of death was determined in 117 of those necropsies and included 12 deaths due to of entanglement with fishing gear and three from boat strikes.

Good advice

It's against Florida law to intentionally discard monofilament into area waters because such line can kill or injure marine mammals, birds, sea turtles and fish. Some area bait shops have recycling bins.

Some tips:

- * Check fishing gear before heading out for the day.
- * Make sure the line is in good shape so it will not break easily and end up in the water or along the rocks where it can pose a danger to wildlife.
- * Stow any used line in containers until it can be safely thrown away or recycled on shore in a secure trash container where it cannot blow back into the water.
- * Motor slowly and carefully away from dolphins that look as if they're waiting for a free lunch and try to release fish away from areas where dolphins are located.

Florida has a monofilament recycling program sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. To learn more about the program, go to <http://www.fishinglinerecycling.org/index.asp>.

Boaters and anglers should be aware that it is a federal offense to feed, harass, touch or otherwise harm a marine mammal.

If you see an injured dolphin, marine mammal or sea turtle, contact Mote Marine Laboratory's Stranding Investigations Program by pager at (941) 988-0212.

During the May 1-Oct. 31 Sea Turtle Season, lights near the beach pose additional hazards to nesting and hatchling turtles. Avoid the use of any lights at the beach and be sure to shield home lights by drawing draperies or closing shutters during the season.

When turtles become disoriented, they can become stranded or worse, can even be crushed by cars on roads near the beach.

The city has a new process for reporting light infractions in Venice during turtle-nesting season. Call code enforcement inspectors at 486-2626: Willie Mitchell at Ext. 2079 or John Patek at Ext. 2326 if you see lights shining on beaches in the city of Venice.

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