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MOODY GARDENS HELPS IN RELEASE OF 185 COLD-STUNNED GREEN SEA TURTLES

Turtles released Wednesday in warmer waters off North Padre Island

GALVESTON, Texas (January 11, 2018) – Nearly 200 Green Sea Turtles were released off North Padre Island this afternoon after spending nearly a week on Galveston Island, where they were cared for after being stranded on the Gulf Coast due to being cold-stunned.

More than 90 of those turtles were housed and cared for at Moody Gardens since late last week following a dramatic drop in temperatures that left the turtles stranded in East Matagorda Bay, about 100 miles southwest of Galveston.

In all, nearly 300 Green Sea Turtles were rescued along a five-mile stretch of the bay. Roughly 75 were released Tuesday off North Padre Island with another 185 released Wednesday. Some turtles will remain at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Lab on Galveston Island until they are well enough to be released back into the wild.

"These Green Sea Turtles naturally feed on sea grasses so they were in those shallow bay water environments when the temperatures dropped dramatically," said Greg Whittaker, Moody Gardens animal husbandry manager. "It is unprecedented to see this many cold-stunned turtles on the Gulf Coast."

Green Sea Turtles, which can be found along the entire Texas coastline, may become cold-stunned when water temperatures drop to 50 degrees. When that happens, the turtle's metabolism begins to shut down and they respond by expanding their lungs and floating to the top of the water. Doing so can further expose them as they let colder air into their lungs. Unable to swim, many are pushed up to the shoreline.

Ninety-five rescued turtles were held inside the Moody Gardens animal holding area for the past week and ranged in size from 6 to 70 pounds and are 18 months to 9-10 years old.

Moody Gardens helped care for the turtles in support of NOAA's rescue mission. Officials chose North Padre Island, just south of Corpus Christi, as the release site so that the turtles would enter warmer waters. Another cold front is expected to hit the Galveston area this Friday, and the goal was to release the turtles into warmer waters before that happens. The cold front shouldn't impact North Padre Island and the surrounding area.

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“Some turtles were not ready for release Wednesday. We will continue to work with NOAA to be a possible holding place to provide some long-range rehab if needed,” Whittaker said.

After the rescue last week, each turtle was triaged to separate the ones who were healthy from those who needed further care. They were measured, weighed and checked for any abnormalities and wounds. Any that had wounds were put into the sick bay at NOAA’s fisheries lab, where they have been cared for. Staff and volunteers cleaned the turtles, scrubbing off algae, removed debris, grime, barnacles and in some cases, oysters.

Tags were attached to the turtles’ front flippers. Internal tags were also placed so that the animals can be tracked in the future, if needed. Several agencies were involved in rescuing the turtles from local law enforcement, sheriff departments, constables, Texas Parks and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“Moody Gardens’ mission has always focused on conserving natural spaces and resources. This is just a natural progression for us,” Whittaker said. “If you look at the natural habitat around Moody Gardens, sea turtles is probably one of the highest profile species that lives in our native waters and in need of our help.”

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