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Georgia Living People & Places®

Triage for Turtles

Injured turtles get medical treatment on Jekyll Island. —page 3

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Staffers (clockwise from left) Dr. Terry Norton, Michelle Kaylor, Stefanie Ouellette, Dr. Bill Irwin, Ashley Fisher, and Erika Kemler tend to an injured Florida cooter named Dusty.



Saving Sea Turtles

Turtles in distress get medical treatment and a chance to live, thanks to a new facility on Jekyll Island. By **Joe Rada**, photography **Joseph De Sciose**



ABOVE, CENTER: Unique patterns mark the shells and skin of diamondback terrapin hatchlings. "Like fingerprints on humans, no two are alike," says marine field projects coordinator Stefanie Ouellette. RIGHT: The center houses informative exhibits—including a model of a giant prehistoric turtle suspended overhead—as well as live hatchlings and injured patients undergoing rehabilitation.



Triage for Turtles

If you find an injured sea turtle on land or in water, here's what the Georgia Sea Turtle Center wants you to do. Immediately call the Georgia Department of Natural Resources at (912) 264-7218 or 1-800-272-8363 to report the problem. Experts capable of handling the situation, sometimes including the center's staff, will jump into action to do whatever can be done to save the turtle.

A dawn call from an alert beachcomber to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) sets off a flurry of activity at the Georgia Sea Turtle Center on Jekyll Island. Before long, Dr. Terry Norton, the center's head veterinarian and interim director, lugs a wet, heavy, hard-shelled load into the triage facility, which opened just more than a year ago in a renovated 1903 power plant in the historic district on Jekyll Island. As the turtle expert closest to where this injured loggerhead sea turtle washed ashore, he received the DNR's call to action.

The center's crew of aquarists and veterinary assistants, also alerted to the situation, swarms in and prepares a medical treatment area to receive and assess the patient. They're careful around the turtle's powerful flippers, which instinctively maintain a constant swimming motion and can be dangerous. Judging by an infected gash in the barnacle-encrusted shell, Terry speculates, it looks as if this loggerhead might have encountered a boat propeller some time ago, and the festering wound finally overwhelmed her.

As the team works, a member of the educational staff grabs a microphone and explains what's going on to a crowd gathering at a broad window to watch. Besides being an emergency clinic and rehab facility for turtles in trouble, the center is also an informative museum about various species whose dwindling numbers mark them as endangered. When front doors open and the public drifts in to check out exhibits, maps, models, and murals, they're

often drawn to this clinic window to see biological science at work.

"Before this center opened," Terry says during a lull, "Georgia didn't have a place to treat injured sea turtles. Any we found, we had to send out of state. Now we're able to take care of our own and even accept the overflow from turtle centers in neighboring states when they need us to."

Normal Days Most of the time, no such emergencies arise. Business as usual means feeding and otherwise caring for a variety of saltwater, freshwater, and land-based turtles, large and small, who've found their way to this institution. Besides ocean-cruising species such as loggerhead, hawksbill, green, Kemp's ridley, and leatherback sea turtles, the center also treats injured Florida cooters from lakes and rivers, burrowing gopher tortoises from inland, and others.

"We go through a lot of mackerel, clams, squid, and shrimp to feed these sea turtles," says hospital coordinator Erica Kemler as she moves among large, open-topped tanks holding recovering patients. "Some will eat what you throw to them. Weaker ones we have to feed through tubes, running meals through a blender first so that they're like milk shakes. Just as at any zoo, we document everything we do, keeping records of treatments, bandage changes, weight gain or loss, food consumed, progress made, and so on."

"The average stay for a turtle might be several months here," Terry says. "Some could be ready to get back to the wild quicker. Others might never be able to survive on their own again. We

try to make the best use of the time we have them here to share their stories with the public, but the main goal is to get the turtles healthy and to empty this place out."

A Clear Mission In the year-plus that the Georgia Sea Turtle Center has been open, scores of turtles have benefited from its services. Some cases involve apparent run-ins with boats, predators, pollution, or disease. Others include hatchlings, called stragglers, that get left behind in a nest after hatching and don't have the energy to emerge on their own. Concerned people pitch in to give them a fighting chance.

"A lot goes on at the center," says marine field projects coordinator Stefanie Ouellette, "and on the beach too. We monitor nests, tag nesting turtles, attach transmitters to turtles' shells so that we can track them by satellite, and lead field trips to teach people about sea turtles."

"If you see empty tanks here, don't feel too disappointed, because that's actually good news," Terry adds. "It means we've encountered fewer injured sea turtles lately. Our goal is to treat the ones we get and release them. With all the obstacles turtles face in the wild today, we haven't had empty tanks very often."

Georgia Sea Turtle Center: 214 Stable Road, Jekyll Island, GA 31527; www.georgiaseaturtlecenter.org or (912) 635-4444. **Hours:** 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily. **Admission:** \$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 ages 4-12. Volunteers are welcome. Ask about field trips on Jekyll beaches.



ABOVE: Dylan, a loggerhead who lived in captivity for 10 years at a nature center, an aquarium, and the Georgia Sea Turtle Center, recently was released into the wild. A transmitter attached to her shell lets researchers track her wanderings. LEFT: Georgia Sea Turtle Center hospital coordinator Erika Kemler and head veterinarian Dr. Terry Norton examine Griffin, an injured loggerhead. The public watches through windows as a staffer explains what's going on.

Now That's Dedication

Georgia Sea Turtle Center hospital coordinator Erika Kemler pulls rubber wading boots on over her teal surgical scrubs, leaps into an open-topped water tank, and scrubs vigorously at its blue walls. The facility's population of temporary residents is low today, making it a fine time for housekeeping. "We all clean tanks," Erika says of coworkers who are devoted to helping turtles. "My main job is assisting in surgeries, doing blood work, bandaging wounds, and whatever else the veterinarian needs me to do, but keeping tanks clean is important too. Anything to help get turtles back to health so we can release them into the wild is worth the effort."