Padre Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Padre Island National Seashore

The Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle

The Kemp's ridley sea turtle, *Lepidochelys kempii*, is the smallest and most endangered sea turtle species in the world. In 1947, an estimated 40,000 females were filmed nesting on a single day in Mexico. But by 1985, only 702 nests were found worldwide and the species was nearly extinct.

After decades of conservation efforts, Kemp's ridley nesting is increasing in both Mexico and the United States. The Kemp's ridley is the species most often found nesting on Padre Island National Seashore, its most important nesting beach in the United States.

Nesting Kemp's ridley. NPS photo.

Turtle Traits

Of the five sea turtle species that roam the Gulf of Mexico, the Kemp's ridley is the smallest, with an average length of 23 to 27.5 inches and average weight of 100 pounds at adulthood. Kemp's ridleys are the only sea turtles with an almost circular upper shell. The young are dark gray but change in color as they mature. Adults are olive green in color above and yellow below.

The Kemp's ridley's range is mainly in the Gulf of Mexico, but immature turtles, probably carried by the currents, often appear along the Atlantic coast, as far north as New England and Nova Scotia. Within their range, Kemp's ridleys feed mostly on crabs, but their diet also includes other marine invertebrates and plants, especially when they are young.

Kemp's ridley turtles reach maturity at 10-15 years of age. On average, females come ashore to lay their eggs every two years. The males spend their entire lives at sea once they have hatched. The group of eggs laid by one mother at one time is referred to as a "clutch". During each nesting season, April through mid-July, females lay an average of two to three clutches of eggs. One clutch can have from 50 to 130 eggs.

Species Decline

Photo by Andres Herrera, 1947, Mexico.

Kemp's ridley is the most endangered species of sea turtle. Biologists did not know the location of the main Kemp's ridley nesting beach until the early 1960's, when a film was discovered that showed an estimated 40,000 females nesting at Playa de Rancho Nuevo, Mexico on one day in 1947. The Kemp's ridley population underwent a devastating decline in the mid-1900s, primarily due to over-harvest of eggs and loss of juveniles and adults due to commercial fishing. Despite protection efforts by the Mexican government, the population continued to decline. In 1985, only 702 Kemp's ridley nests were found worldwide, and the species was nearly extinct.

Preserving and Protecting the Species

To help save the Kemp's ridley, the United States, Texas, and Mexico joined forces to increase nesting by this indigenous species at Padre Island National Seashore to form a secondary nesting colony at a protected beach in the U.S. This was done as a safeguard against extinction. From 1978 to 1988, a total of 22,507 eggs were collected at the species' primary nesting beach at Rancho Nuevo, Mexico. The eggs were packed in Padre Island sand and transported to a laboratory at Padre Island National Seashore and incubated.

After hatching, the turtles were released on the beach and allowed to crawl to the surf, hopefully imprinting them to Padre Island. Following a short swim in the Gulf of Mexico, the hatchlings were recaptured and transported to the National Marine Fisheries Service Laboratory in Galveston, Texas to be headstarted. The turtles were kept there for a year so they could grow large enough to avoid most predators and to be tagged. Then they were released into the Gulf of Mexico. The first two recorded returnees from this experimental imprinting and headstarting project were found nesting on Padre Island National Seashore in 1996.

Extensive conservation efforts have continued for Kemp's ridley in Mexico and the U.S., including the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Recovery Project conducted at Padre Island National Seashore. Due to years of multi-agency, international efforts, Kemp's ridley nesting is increasing in Mexico and the U.S.

Most Kemp's ridley nesting in the U.S. occurs in Texas. More than half of the Kemp's ridley nests found in the U.S. each year are at Padre Island National Seashore, making it the most important Kemp's ridley nesting beach in the U.S.

How You Can Help

You can help biologists protect the nesting Kemp's ridley turtles and nests from various natural and human threats that could impact their survival. If you visit the Gulf of Mexico beachfront at the National Seashore during the nesting season, be watchful for nesting turtles. Drive carefully to avoid inadvertently colliding with nesting turtles, which are too slow to flee from an approaching vehicle. Immediately report nesting to a passing turtle patroller or to National Seashore personnel at (361) 949-8173, ext. 226. Do not rush up to a nesting female or you may frighten her back into the water without nesting. After she has laid a few eggs, place a distinguishing marker next to the nest and record any flipper tag numbers that you see. Allow the turtle to nest undisturbed and make sure that she safely re-enters the water after nesting. If possible, stay at the site until a biologist arrives to document and protect the nesting turtle and nest. Do not take any nesting turtles, eggs, or hatchlings into your possession since it is illegal. Inform others about the plight of the Kemp's ridley.

Witness a Kemp's Ridley Hatchling Release

Hatchling Hotline: (361) 949-7163

Eggs from most of the nests found on North Padre Island and northward on the Texas coast are brought to the incubation facility at the National Seashore for protected care.

Kemp's ridley hatchlings. NPS photo.

Once nests are found, their estimated hatchling release dates are listed on the National Seashore's website, www.nps.gov/pais. Hatchlings are typically released on one or two days within each of these estimated date ranges. Public releases are held when at least two nests are due to hatch and be released. This helps ensure that if one or more nests has a poor hatch, or if hatchlings enter their very active state called a frenzy, when they must be released immediately during the evening, that there will still be at least one other nest available for the early morning public release. People traveling from out of town to attend a release should target dates when several clutches are due to be released. Arrive at the beginning of the estimated date range, just in case all eggs hatch early within that date range. As the release date that you are interested in nears, call the recorded Hatchling Hotline at (361) 949-7163 for the latest information on the upcoming release.

For more information:

For the latest information on the number of nests found at the National Seashore and in Texas, including estimated hatchling release dates, visit the Padre Island National Seashore website at http://www.nps.gov/pais.

Follow the park's sea turtle program activities and news on Facebook at Padre Island NS Division of Sea Turtle Science & Recovery. For the latest updates on hatchling releases, call the recorded Hatchling Hotline at (361) 949-7163.