

Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles



Until recently, the critically endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtle was on the brink of extinction. Thanks to strict protection laws implemented in the 1960's which protected their nesting beaches in Mexico, the species has begun a slow, but steady comeback from a previous low of only 200 nesting individuals in the 1980's, to over 12,000 nests laid in 2006 in Mexico. This species is the smallest of the seven sea turtles, weighing between 75-100 pounds and measuring approximately 2 feet long.

Facts:

- Their scientific name is *Lepidochelys kempii*
- This is the only species of sea turtle that nest primarily during the day. They also nest in mass similar to their relative the Olive ridley (also known as an arribada).
- They possess a triangular shaped head with a hooked beak and strong jaws. They inhabit nearshore habitats where they forage for their favorite prey, crabs. They also eat fish, jellies, shrimp and a variety of mollusks.
- They are considered Critically Endangered around the world by the IUCN Red List and listed as Endangered in the US.
- Kemp's ridleys reach sexual maturity between 10-15 years of age which is significantly younger than most of the other species of sea turtle.



Distribution:

In the US, these turtles are found in the Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic coast as far north as Nova Scotia. The primary nesting grounds in Mexico are at Rancho Nuevo, in the state of Tamaulipas, and in Texas along the Padre Island National Seashore. A small number have also nested further north along the Texas coast. However, 95% of all nesting occurs in Mexico in the state of Tamaulipas.

Major Threats:

Their population today is a fraction of the population recorded in the 1940's. The demise of the population is attributed to human interactions, including the hunting of turtles for their meat and the consumption of eggs. Incidental capture in fishing gear also poses an enormous threat for this species. Bottom trawling, longline, and gillnet fisheries are all responsible for a large number of turtle deaths every year.



Did You Know?

- Kemp's and Olive ridley sea turtles are the only species of sea turtle that nest in mass, also known as "arribadas," which in Spanish means "the arrival".
- In 1947 an arribada of over 40,000 Kemp's ridleys was filmed at Rancho Nuevo, Mexico. In the mid-1980's a low of around 700 nests were documented on these same beaches. Since this time the population appears to be recovering thanks to the protection of nesting beaches and the use of Turtle Excluder Devices on commercial trawlers.
- The Kemp's ridley was named after Richard Kemp, a fisherman from Key West, Florida, who helped discover the species.



Links & Resources:

IUCN Red List of Endangered Species: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/11533>

Houston Chronicle Article - <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/front/5894351.html>

S. Padre Island Nesting: http://www.valleycentral.com/news/news_story.aspx?id=295259



These materials are provided by SEE Turtles, a non-profit project that protects sea turtles through conservation travel. Visit our website, www.seeturtles.org for other fact sheets, school lesson plans, fundraising ideas, presentations, and field trips. Contact us at info@seeturtles.org for more information.