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Environment: Wildlife

Experts come up with risky plan to save sea turtle hatchlings from gulf oil spill

By Craig Pittman, Times Staff Writer In Print: Tuesday, June 29, 2010

To save a generation of sea turtles from being wiped out by the Deepwater Horizon disaster, state and federal biologists have hatched a daring but risky plan.

They plan to excavate the 800 or so nests that the turtles have dug along Florida's Panhandle beaches and the Alabama coast, and carefully move all the eggs about 500 miles to the east — most likely to a climate-controlled warehouse at Kennedy Space Center.

Any turtles that survive the move and hatch would then be released into the Atlantic Ocean, which so far has not been polluted by the oil spill.

Although thousands of turtle hatchlings could die from being moved, "This is the least of the worst case scenarios," said Chuck Underwood, a spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Even if what we're doing isn't a great thing, it's better than doing nothing."

If the biologists left the nests where they are now, he said, 50,000 turtle hatchlings "will go out into the gulf and get into the oil, and there's a high degree of certainty that that would be fatal."

The first nest to be moved, full of endangered Kemp's ridley turtle eggs, was dug up Saturday, according to Underwood. The nests are being flagged now, and the egg moving is likely to begin in earnest next month.

Normally this is the kind of thing that an environmental group like the Sea Turtle Conservancy would protest. But not now.

"We think this is really necessary to save this year's whole hatchling class," said David Godfrey of the conservancy. "It's pretty much a last ditch effort to save tens of thousands of hatchlings from swimming out to their doom."

Biologists from state and federal agencies began working back in May on what to do about the sea turtles that nest along the northern Gulf Coast. They debated the pros and cons of relocating

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the nests to various places, and finally drew up a nine-page plan.

"The activities identified in these protocols are extraordinary measures being taken in direct response to an unprecedented human-caused disaster," the plan states.

No one could say how much the effort will cost, but the assumption is that BP will pay for it.

Turtle eggs hatch after about 55 days. So when the nests are at least 51 days old, then it will be time to start digging the eggs out. The plan requires excavating the nests by hand and then putting eggs into foam containers "that are soaked, washed with water, allowed to completely dry, and drilled with appropriate air circulation holes before eggs are placed in them."

The plan warns that "a 3-inch layer of moist sand from the nest cavity or vicinity of the nest site should be placed into the bottom of each Styrofoam box," and then when the eggs are packed in it, "a 2- to 3-inch layer of moist sand should be placed on top of the eggs."

The plan commands the crews moving the nests to "take extreme care not to rotate the eggs in any way during handling," and it also says, "Styrofoam boxes must not be tilted for any reason."

Initially the plan called for flying the boxes to the other coast, but Underwood said biologists worried about changing air pressure, engine vibrations and tilting the boxes on takeoff and landing. So instead the eggs will get a truck ride to the coast, which could take six to eight hours.

Once the boxes reach the Atlantic coast, they will be stored in a "designated incubation facility" where they will be monitored until the eggs hatch. Underwood said there have been discussions about using a Kennedy Space Center warehouse, but no contracts have been signed yet.

While in the warehouse, the sand-covered eggs must be "lightly sprinkled with water from a watering can as needed to keep sand moist, but not wet," the plan says.

If any hatchlings emerge, they will be collected each night and released on one of several east Florida beaches to make their way to the ocean. Releasing the hatchlings into the Atlantic makes sense because, based on tracking prior migrations from the gulf, that's where they would have headed anyway, said Henry Cabbage, a spokesman for the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

"We're just giving them a ride," he joked.

However, one of the unknowns about this turtle migration is what it will do to their internal navigational systems. Sea turtles use their orientation with the earth's magnetic fields to swim back to the beach where they were born to lay new eggs. No one knows if moving the eggs right before they hatch will alter the hatchlings' ability to find their way back home someday.

"Potentially you could be messing with that process a little bit," Godfrey said. "But at least they'd still be on a Florida beach."

This isn't the first time humans have had to rescue sea turtles this year. During the January cold snap, about 2,000 were so stunned by the low temperatures that biologists captured and rehabilitated them.

So far, more than 100 sea turtles coated in oil have been pulled from the gulf, according to figures released Sunday by the Coast Guard and BP. Nine were already dead.

*Craig Pittman can be reached at [craig@sptimes.com](mailto:craig@sptimes.com) or (727) 893-8530.*

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[U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service]

This image is from a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service document showing how sea turtle eggs will be dug up and packed by hand into containers and moved to Florida's Atlantic Coast.

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**This is not here** wrote:

This administration could care less about the turtles; the environment; or you. The ends justifies the means. By the time most people figure it out; it's too late...people repeating history.

Jun 28, 2010 8:10 PM

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**Surrealist** wrote:

I applaud the researchers desire to help. Ironically, it seems the more humans try and help, the worse off things become. I thought the current models showed the oil rounding the keys and flowing north in the Gulf Stream. Wouldn't this just put them at risk again?  
It reminds me of how many people drove their cars from Tampa toward Orlando to "escape" hurricane Charly, only to find themselves right in it's path. The storm missed Tampa completely.  
Or the folks who decide they hate Florida so much because of the risk of hurricanes deciding that Tennessee is the new Promised land, until the tornados and floods sweep through.

Jun 28, 2010 8:32 PM

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**BeachQueen** wrote:

Whatever the outcome, at least they're doing SOMETHING to be pro-active... which is more than we can say for BP and all of their "efforts".

Jun 28, 2010 9:13 PM

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**Beachie** wrote:

Please SPT, keep us informed as to what happens, good or bad.

Jun 28, 2010 10:42 PM

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**mr.fabulous** wrote:

You guys are awesome. Do good work, good things will come of it.

Jun 28, 2010 11:31 PM

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**Dr\_Dug** wrote:

It's Obamas Fault...

Jun 29, 2010 12:12 AM

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**BeachQueen** wrote:

I must agree Dr\_Dug... it was his administration that granted BP an exemption to drill in the gulf. So should the 'chosen one' or BP have to pay for the turtles trip to the east coast?? THAT is the question...

Jun 29, 2010 12:45 AM

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**chet** wrote:

Why not enclose the area and catch them when the hatch and try to move to the water. Then they will at least have survived the hatching process.

Jun 29, 2010 1:28 AM

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**smithley29** wrote:

There are still a lot of opportunities to enjoy your summer vacation at Florida beach and possibly save a great deal of money as well state is giving incentives to visit Florida, check out these unbelievable deals at <http://bit.ly/dwKcDI> and plan your vacation

Jun 29, 2010 4:55 AM

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**SS** wrote:

@chet: because sea turtles return to the beach they were born to lay their eggs.

Jun 29, 2010 6:22 AM

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**isleofjava** wrote:

I wonder if this will work ?????? If it does succeed at a high percentage rate, that would be a great boon. It sure IS risky. I, too, wonder why releasing them in the Atlantic makes any sense. If the turtles DO return to where they were born, will they try instively to get back to the west coast and, thereby, die in the process? It amazes me how strong some instincts are. That's one heck of a swim! Will the oil actually be carried by the currents into the Atlantic shores and, then, will all this effort and expense be a waste of money and possibly put them even more into harm's way? So many questions. So few answers.

Jun 29, 2010 7:41 AM

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**map354** wrote:

isleofjava, I dont think even the experts have the answers to those questions, but doing something gives them a better chance than letting them jump straight into the oil.

Jun 29, 2010 7:51 AM

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**sndinc** wrote:

I'm happy to know that an organization is thinking about the turtles and has developed a plan of action to save them. I too am worried about whether they will find their way home for the next generation, but at least they will now have a chance. This Oil spill disaster needs more caring people and organizations to help. Not enough is being done and with hurricane season on the brink, this is going to get much worse, quickly.

Jun 29, 2010 10:07 AM

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**tt** wrote:

It won't be the government, and it sure as hell won't be BP, to make these kind of decisions and act on them. It will be the average American, as usual, to innovate and go ahead and do seemingly small important things such as this, to save whatever can be saved. In every disaster in this country, natural or man made, it has been the people who take the initiative and just go out and do, while the executives and politicians stand around arguing and scratching their a\$\$.

Jun 29, 2010 10:16 AM

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**onthegulf** wrote:

Beach Queen and Dr Dug  
Excuse me, but the BP marriage started with Mr. Cheney and George Bush. Have you forgotten that. Have you wondered why they are not speaking up on this, they are to fault.

Jun 29, 2010 2:20 PM

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**marcos** wrote:

wonder if these turtles will imprint this new site as their "birthplace" and return there? Interesting...

Jun 29, 2010 2:25 PM

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**sidney** wrote:

Interesting. I look forward to hearing or reading more about this.

Jun 29, 2010 5:03 PM

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**moose** wrote:

BP is corralling them in oil collection pools and burning them alive. Along with other sea life.

Jun 29, 2010 5:35 PM

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**Floridave** wrote:

You see, the thing to remember here is this: They are just turtles. In the Cayman Islands they farm these things. They release some and eat the rest.

If these things are so important, why don't we do that here?

Jun 29, 2010 10:08 PM

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**independentvoter** wrote:

"This administration"? Are you a moron? We just had 8 years of a country run by people with deep, deep ties to the energy and weapons sector.

They are the ones who eviscerated the DEP and cut back on regulations everywhere (see financial collapse/Wall Street for one example), especially in oil exploration.

Oil connections to Bush, The Lesser and Dick "Halliburton" Cheney abound. What did you expect? That Obama could clean up everything they messed up overnight?

The leak is BP's fault, not President Obamas, no matter what Sean Hannity or Glenn Beck told you. I'm a political independent and I'll never vote for the GOP again in any election because of 1) Bill Clinton BJ witch-hunt; 2) BushCo. (tm).

Damn them. Damn them all to hell and their moronic "supporters".

You'd rather blame the guy who just got on the job. What

Jun 29, 2010 10:22 PM

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**Floridave** wrote:

Hating republicans doesn't make you an independent voter. You sound more like a Rachel Maddow or Keith Olbermann fan club president. Keep watching them. Have some friends over when you do and maybe you can double their viewership.

Jun 30, 2010 2:29 PM

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