

SEA TURTLE STRANDING PATTERNS IN CALIFORNIA: 1982-2004

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Analysis of records of sea turtle strandings provide an important source of information on spatial and seasonal sea turtle distribution, as well as an identification of local threats to subpopulations. Records of sea turtle strandings (live and dead) off California have been collected since 1982 by a network of individuals and organizations dedicated to responding to stranded marine wildlife. This paper provides the first detailed summary of the California sea turtle stranding network and an analysis of stranding data in California since information was first collected in 1982. From 1982 through 2004, a total of 274 sea turtles have stranded in California. Of this total, approximately 35.8 % were leatherbacks, 34.3 % were green turtles, 13.5 % were olive ridleys, 11.7 % were loggerheads, and 4.7 % were of unknown identification. Analyses of the data reflect spatial and seasonal patterns of strandings with annual variations, and these patterns are coincident with incidental capture in fisheries, at-sea observations, and other available information. Documented causes for strandings include: entrapment in power plants (18%), illness-related (9.1%), boat collisions (8.3%), fisheries interactions (6.6%), and marine debris (1.8%). Nearly 55% of sea turtle strandings were due to unknown or undocumented causes, which is cause for concern since valuable information may be lost from these strandings. In order to address these concerns and improve response to sea turtle strandings and data collected by the network, NOAA Fisheries' Southwest Regional Office (SWRO) held a two-day sea turtle stranding and necropsy workshop in August, 2005. Representatives from the stranding network and NOAA Fisheries' SWRO and Science Centers (La Jolla and Honolulu), as well as invited wildlife veterinarians, participated in the workshop. Following recommendations made at the workshop, the SWRO, with assistance from the Marine Turtle Research Program, NOAA Fisheries, in La Jolla, will establish a protocol of data collection on live and dead-stranded sea turtles, in addition to standardizing and designing a U.S. west coast sea turtle stranding form. In addition, there is a critical need to synthesize information collected on dead sea turtles, including necropsy results. SWRO will investigate existing and potential collaborators or contractors that can serve as the recipient of all stranding and necropsy results, synthesize and summarize known information and make recommendations for future collections. SWRO has also worked to identify facilities within the stranding network to respond to sea turtles that strand dead in Orange, LA, and Ventura counties. Furthermore, the SWRO will work with the offshore Channel Islands to increase reporting and response to stranded sea turtles and consider the logistics of transporting live-stranded sea turtles that may need rehabilitation on the mainland. Lastly, the SWRO will work to design and provide outreach materials to the general public, lifeguards, etc. regarding response and contact information for sea turtle strandings.

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