

Buried alive!

by NORINE ROUSE

FEW DIVERS have ever seen turtles buried in the mud. It had been surmised that this occurs, however, because turtles have been dredged up in the Canaveral channel on the east coast of Florida.

The reason turtles bury themselves is neither known nor understood. This may be a form of hibernation, a means of ridding themselves of barnacles, or a way to warm themselves after passing through cold water (since turtles are susceptible to hypothermia). Until now, there have been no known underwater eyewitness reports.

Large male loggerhead turtles have been observed with a barnacle pattern that suggests they have been partially buried and that the barnacles have died from lack of oxygen. This pattern is like an inverted V with only the barnacles on the middle and rear end still alive. Many of the large male loggerheads seen in the Palm Beach area in winter exhibit this pattern.

On February 3, 1984, members of a scuba club were diving on the 80-foot reef east and a little south of Palm Beach Inlet. This is a popular dive spot, and is visited several times a

80 feet - 24.4 meters

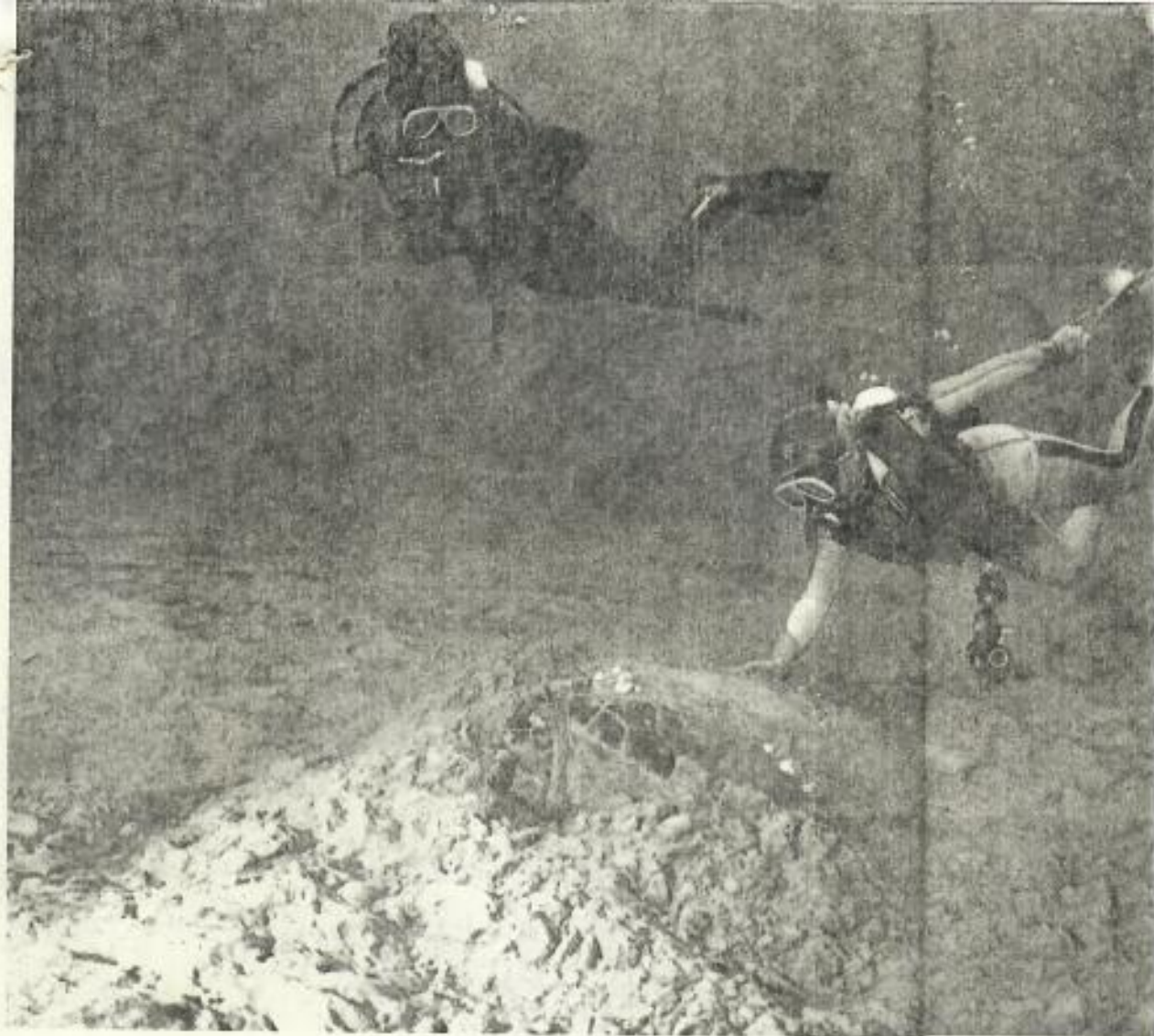


Ted Colson, Jr.

ONLY ITS SHELL betrays a loggerhead turtle, buried in the mud, to divers. The reason why this air-breathing reptile would bury itself is a mystery.

week, summer and winter. Until this year, the area to the west of the reef was made of sand. Now there is mud a few inches thick just off the reef. This mud increases to nearly a foot out from the reef. It is believed to be sediment from the tremendous amount of freshwater pumped into the ocean through the canal system by Florida Water Management. This was done

1 foot - 30.5 centimeters



to lower the level of Lake Okeechobee and to prevent flooding. This mud is extremely slick and seems to be made up of very fine particles. When stirred up, it stays in solution for a long time before settling.

The author, a member of the dive group, sighted what looked like a discarded turtle carapace on the muddy bottom. She swam over to examine it more closely and lifted it from the

rear to see if she could find out what killed it. She was surprised to find it was a whole turtle, and *alive*. It woke up slowly, raised its head from beneath the mud, and took off in a cloud of silt.

Another carapace was spied. Like the first, it was a large female loggerhead, only not as sound asleep; so it responded more rapidly, stirring up so much silt that it became impossible

to see anything was in 90 feet temperature noon, in the two more lar buried. As on these were lar

Since that turtles have body pits have 90 feet = 27.4 meters;



pulling
a float?

DISTURBED BY DIVERS at a depth of 90 feet (left), a buried loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*) moves quickly, stirring up the bottom (below). At rest a loggerhead can survive for hours without breathing.

Both photographs by J. D. Duff



ould find out what surprised to find it and *alive*. It woke its head from bed took off in a cloud

ce was spied. Like large female log-as sound asleep; so rapidly, stirring up became impossible

to see anything else in the area. This was in 90 feet of water, with a bottom temperature of 71°F. Later that afternoon, in the same water conditions, two more large turtles were found buried. As on the earlier dive, both of these were large female loggerheads.

Since that time, no more buried turtles have been found, although body pits have been seen. This indi-

90 feet = 27.4 meters, 71°F = 21.7°C

cates that the turtles bury themselves only for a short time, or they bury themselves so deeply that no part of their carapace is visible to the diver. Subsequent observations suggest that they do not stay buried long enough in this area to term their behavior as hibernation. As often happens, when one such piece of information is found, it leads to many new questions that only time can answer. □