

The turtle lady with a HEART

By Bonnie McKenna



She has been fascinated by turtles, since she was five years old when her brother brought home a little red-eared slider; a fresh water turtle.

"I was just enthralled by that turtle and the others that came to live at our home," said Allen.

In 1973, when Allen and her family moved to Houston, she learned about sea turtles in Texas when she visited the NOAA Fisheries Service in Galveston. The NOAA scientists were attempting to recover the decimated Kemp's ridley turtle population by raising turtle hatchlings in buckets until they could fend for themselves. Kemp's ridley turtles are found in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. It is one of the most endangered turtle species worldwide.

"In 1982, I organized a field trip for my daughter's class to see the turtles in Galveston. The kids were captivated by the turtle hatchlings. During that visit, we learned that the program's funding was being cut. The kids really wanted to do something to help the turtles, so we formed HEART (Help Endangered Animals Ridley Turtles). The kids wrote letters to President Reagan asking him to help the turtles. The story of the kids writing the president was picked up by the media and soon the program was funded for another 10 years," Allen said.

After learning that HEART was a volunteer project, schools from across the nation became interested in joining the turtle project. Allen made sure each child that sent HEART a \$4 donation, enough to feed a hatchling for a year, received a certificate of thanks. Each year that NOAA was releasing thousands of hatchlings into the gulf; thousands of turtles were being killed by trawl techniques used to catch shrimp. Although sea turtles were on the endangered species list and protected from being killed or captured by the Endangered Species Act, there was little enforcement of the law.

"We lost thousands of turtles because of shrimp trawls. Remember, a turtle is not a fish; it needs to breathe. Of course, the shrimpers and fishing industry argued that their trawling techniques were harmless, but we could prove it was not harmless by the number of dead turtles being washed-up as the trawlers moved up and down the coast," said Allen. After a lot of experimentation, the National Marine Fisheries Service developed the Turtle Extruder Device (TED); a device that allows turtles to escape the trawl nets. A law now mandates that all shrimp trawlers have TEDs on their nets.

"The shrimpers fought us tooth and nail, and they really resented a homemaker telling them to change they way they fished," Allen said with a laugh. "We ended up having to sue the national Fisheries Service to get the TEDs on all the shrimpers. We won the case, but our work is never done."

As a result of the hard work done by Allen, the National Park Service Division of Sea Turtle Science at the Padre Island National Seashore in Texas and the hundreds of volunteers that generously give their time to protect the turtles; the population of the Kemp's ridley is growing. During last year's nesting season, a record 195 nests were laid on the Texas coast.



Allen's latest project is to find enough money to do a sequel to the film "The Heartbreak Turtle" which tells the story of the plight of the Kemp's ridley turtle. "The film was made 30 years ago. It is dated. I would like the sequel to tell about the shrimpers, the TEDs, and how far we have come with the turtle recovery plan, but I need a sponsor or supporter to finish the film," she said.

Allen is also actively trying to encourage Texas to declare the coast of Texas or at the very least, Padre Island, a critical habitat for the Kemp's ridley sea turtle. "And to think," Allen said, "This all started with a red-eared slider. Allen continues her work to protect the Kemp's ridley turtles through HEART and the Sea Turtle Restoration Project. STRP fights to protect endangered sea turtle populations worldwide.

For additional information on Kemp's ridley sea turtles, go to www.seaturtles.org or to learn more about Carole Allen, go to www.SaveTexasSeaTurtles.org.