

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER NATION MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2000 A13

Sea turtles in Florida Keys contract mystery illness

Disease of endangered reptiles increases preservation worries

By Lisa Fuss
Enight Insider News Service

MARATHON, Fla. — Loggerhead sea turtles in the Florida Keys are suffering — and in some cases dying — from a mysterious illness that has marine experts and scientists searching for answers before record numbers of the endangered animal are lost.

In the last six weeks, 11 adult loggerhead turtles have been rescued after being found floating near death in waters off the Keys. That's not counting four loggerheads recently found with similar symptoms along Florida's east and west coasts and the dozens of floating turtles that have been spotted by local boaters but gone untraced.

"Many of these turtles aren't dead, but they look like it, so boaters aren't reporting them to authorities," said Richie Moretti, director of the Turtle Hospital in Marathon, Fla.

"I heard one boat captain counting 14 turtles that were floating on his way here from the Caymans. He thought they were dead, so he didn't bother calling anyone. Without any medical care, those turtles don't have a chance now."

Gloomy prognosis

Even under the best circumstances, the turtles' prognosis appears poor. Two of the 11 loggerheads brought to Mr. Moretti's hospital have died, and the remaining nine are clinging to life in oversize saltwater tanks along Florida Bay.

The scene there is unsettling: All of the turtles lie motionless in their enclosures, unable to open their powerful jaws or blink their dark, round eyes. Some make pitiful gasping noises, a symptom of pneumonia and the mucus that is blocking their airways, veterinarians say.

Hospital workers are forcing Gatorade and liquefied squid down the turtles' throats through long tubes, hoping it will provide some sustenance. Most of the turtles regurgitate the food through their mouths and noses within minutes of the feeding.

Because all of the turtles are unable to close their eyes, ulcers are beginning to grow over them. Caretakers say all they can do is soothe their eye cavities with ointment to combat the dryness.

Puzzling symptoms

Since opening the Middle Keys turtle facility 14 years ago, Mr. Moretti says he has never seen anything like the illness afflicting so many loggerheads with such speed and severity.

While all of the loggerheads have pneumonia, marine experts suspect the lung disease is secondary to what's really making the creatures sick. In fact, Mr. Moretti contends the pneumonia is helping boaters find the turtles because of the symptomatic air bubbles in their lungs that cause them to float.

Paul Klein, a veterinary professor at the University of Florida, said a tissue sample taken from the trachea of one of the dead loggerheads indicated the presence of a herpes virus. The sample must undergo further tests before herpes is confirmed. Scientists are exploring several possibilities, including a herpes virus called lung eye trachea virus.