

SEA TURTLE HOSPITAL AT THE SOUTH CAROLINA AQUARIUM

A New Chapter

BY DANIELLE RAUB

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA AQUARIUM



The story starts with Stinky.

Seventeen years ago, on a hot and humid August day, a dying sea turtle was rushed to the South Carolina Aquarium in a last-ditch effort to save it. Found stranded and floating in Port Royal Sound, the 94-pound loggerhead was suffering from severe emaciation, dehydration and a heavy load of barnacles.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BARBARA BERGWERF



AWENDAW, A LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE IS RELEASED

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STINKY, THE HOSPITAL'S FIRST PATIENT



A HOOK BEING REMOVED



ADMINISTERING A BAG VALVE MASK TO LAZARUS

If this situation occurred today, aquarium staff members would launch into an organized plan of action, including a finely-tuned transport system and a precise medical procedure. Back then, there was no procedure for the emergency treatment of ailing sea turtles, and there were no plans on the horizon for rehabilitating them.

But there, around a makeshift table in the basement of the fledgling South Carolina Aquarium, the question was raised: "What if?"

What if the South Carolina Aquarium could be more than just an aquarium? What if the aquarium could help save this endangered species? What if the aquarium could be a refuge for these animals?

And that's how a lucky loggerhead, affectionately named Stinky, changed everything. From that moment forward, the South Carolina Aquarium has been home to a Sea Turtle Hospital.

Of course, the hospital looked quite a bit different than it does now. Imagine climbing the stairs to the hospital's double doors, crossing the threshold and seeing a loggerhead turtle in a children's plastic swimming pool. Such were the early years of the makeshift Sea Turtle Hospital, operating solely on slapdash equipment and a shared passion for the survival of these amazing animals.

As the Sea Turtle Hospital began releasing more healthy turtles out to sea, the crowds grew. Volunteer groups that guard sea turtle nesting sites, known as Turtle Teams, spread the word, and more onlookers gathered to cheer on the turtles during their journey home. As it turned out, adoration for these animals was not just contained to a little make-do hospital in a basement; in fact, it could hardly be contained. Love for the loggerheads was widespread.

Large tanks replaced the kiddie pools as donations and cash flow to the hospital increased. Volunteers began streaming in, helping to maintain the tanks and clean the facilities. This freed up time for the hospital staff to focus exclusively on rescue, rehabilitation and release.

Over the years, turtle after turtle was rehabilitated and sent home. Each one had a special journey, a harrowing story of overcoming odds with sheer determination, lots of love and dedication and, of course, support from the community.

Such as one turtle aptly named Lazarus. Just after arriving at the Sea Turtle Hospital, this loggerhead began to exhibit the classic signs of sea turtle death: throwing up the head and gasping; moving the front flippers; and pulling the eyes deep into the skull. Hospital staff members sprang into action. They placed a tube down the turtle's trachea so they could "breathe" for the loggerhead using a bag valve mask. They had never before been able to recover a turtle from this state, but Lazarus's heart began beating again. Over the course of ten

months, Lazarus was transformed from a skeletal turtle, too weak to swim, into a robust and healthy loggerhead, fit for release.

Or Briar, the hospital's number one trailblazer and pioneer. Not only was Briar the first patient to undergo cataract surgery, she was the hospital's first repeat patient. Two years after she was released, Briar arrived at the hospital again with a boat strike. The hospital staff took one glance at the patient's size and distinct flipper shape and identified her immediately. That's how much love and dedication goes into the rehabilitation of these turtles. Even after treating countless patients, they still recognized Briar.

There's also Grace, one of the hospital's most beloved turtles. This adorable little green sea turtle was cold-stunned, meaning she had a hypothermic reaction to a sudden dip in water temperatures. Grace started to recover quickly, and it was thought she was in the clear. Unfortunately, this was not just a cut-and-dried case of cold-stunning. She also had a severe plastic impaction in her intestines. The hospital staff decided surgery was the best and last option to save Grace. After skillfully externalizing a portion of Grace's intestines, the veterinarian removed the impaction. It was a piece of clear, sheet-like plastic approximately the size of a silver dollar. Thankfully, after the plastic impaction was extracted, Grace made a full recovery and returned home.

Perhaps one of the Sea Turtle Hospital's most extraordinary cases was Boyles. Boyles was declared neurologically blind after a boat strike. Even after extensive rehabilitation efforts, including cataract surgery, his eyesight was poor at best – so poor that he was declared unfit for release. Disheartened, the hospital staff began searching for a new permanent home for Boyles.

But this story has a happy ending, thanks to the perseverance of a hospital volunteer. This volunteer provided therapy every single day for months, exercising Boyles' eyes by forcing him to search for food in his tank. Thanks to this treatment, his brain generated new neural connections that enabled him to see again. Not only did this loggerhead regain his sight, but he was also able to return to the wild.

Every stage of each turtle's journey, from the moment it arrives at the hospital to the moment it returns home, would not be possible without the love and determination of many. Hospital staff members and volunteers, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, the Turtle Teams and the community all lend a hand in the rescue, rehabilitation and release of sea turtles.

All of this help is necessary as the Sea Turtle Hospital continues to take in more turtles each year. In 2000, just two turtles were admitted; by

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



DR. ANNE COOK, OF ANIMAL EYE CARE OF THE LOWCOUNTRY, PERFORMS CATARACT SURGERY ON BRIAR, A LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE



GRACE, A GREEN SEA TURTLE, IS RELEASED



GREEN SEA TURTLE



A WALL AT ZUCKER FAMILY SEA TURTLE RECOVERY

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA AQUARIUM



INTERACTIVE STATIONS HELP TEACH VISITORS

2015, 30 ailing patients were treated in the hospital. Each year, the space became more crowded. It was time to expand the Sea Turtle Hospital and shed some light on the awe-inspiring process of turtle rehabilitation.

That's why, 17 years since the arrival of Stinky and more than 200 patients later, the South Carolina Aquarium has opened its biggest undertaking to date: Zucker Family Sea Turtle Recovery™.

Sea Turtle Recovery (for short) brings the day-to-day operations of the Sea Turtle Care Center™ into full view on the aquarium's first floor. The daily routine of the past 16 years is no longer confined to the windowless basement of the aquarium. Sea Turtle Recovery is both a hospital and an experience, making the real-life rehabilitation of sick and injured sea turtles visible to every guest that visits the aquarium.

Interactive stations enable guests to learn the causes of sea turtle stranding and to practice diagnosing a mock patient. Spacious tanks and a pool with a water current provide the turtles with more room for healing and therapy. A classroom and theater expand upon sea turtles' journeys from rescue to rehabilitation to release.

We've come a long way from that kiddie pool in the basement. The improved medical facility at Sea Turtle Recovery will enable the hospital staff



DR. SHANE BOYLEN, THE AQUARIUM'S VETERINARIAN, TREATS AWENDAW, A LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA AQUARIUM

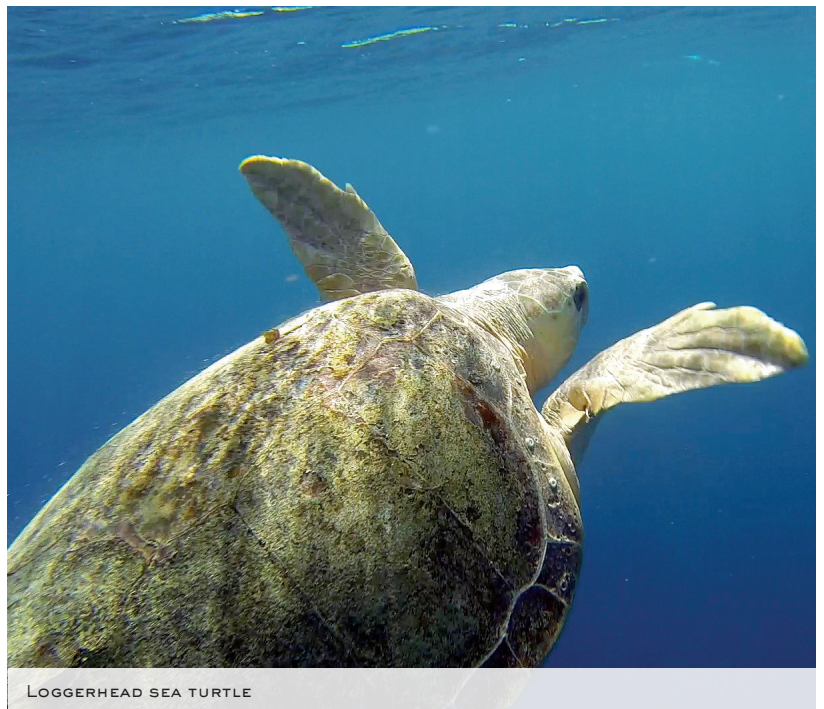
to provide world-class animal care.

A new CT scanner provides superior diagnostic images, helping the veterinary team to see not just a turtle's skeleton, but also its internal organs to diagnose conditions in the lungs or intestines. And a modern operating room is the perfect space to perform surgical procedures. At times, guests can even see a medical operation in progress through the room's viewing window.

Sea turtles have been on this earth for more than 100 million years, surviving history's most infamous mass extinction event. They are resilient, but they are not invincible. They face more trials than ever before as threats such as plastic pollution, unsustainable fishing and sea level rise become more prevalent. With Zucker Family Sea Turtle Recovery, the South Carolina Aquarium is helping them survive for another 100 million years.

It's been a long journey, and not just for the sea turtles. So much has changed in just 17 years. At this very moment in Sea Turtle Recovery, staff members are getting to know their new and improved surroundings, and the sea turtle patients are settling into their brand new tanks. The aquarium's biggest adventure has really just begun.

Just think – it all started on a makeshift table in a dark, windowless basement with a loggerhead sea turtle named Stinky.



LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE

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