

**EVERY SEA TURTLE COUNTS!**  
**NATIONAL AQUARIUM RETURNS HEALTHY LOGGERHEAD TO SEA**  
*In rehabilitation for over a year, the loggerhead turtle is the 82<sup>nd</sup> animal  
rehabbed and released by Aquarium Rescue Program*

Baltimore, September 19, 2009 – After a year-long rehabilitation, the National Aquarium’s Marine Animal Rescue Program (MARP), returned a now-healthy loggerhead sea turtle to its ocean habitat from the beaches at Assateague State Park. Over 500 people gathered on the beach for the release and watched in anticipation as the turtle swam through the waves, and returned to sea.

The loggerhead was admitted to the National Aquarium in July 2008 with nearly 10 pounds of organisms living on and permeating its shell, including barnacles, blue mussels, and sea grasses. Within the first few days of rehabilitation, the turtle had shed most of these abundant hitchhikers; however, the embedded organisms caused deep shell infections that took nearly a year to heal.

To the National Aquarium, investing time and resources to healing one individual sea turtle is important because there are only seven living species of sea turtles globally, and **all of them are either endangered or threatened**. “All sea turtle species are at risk of being wiped out completely, and so the rehabilitation and release of even one individual turtle helps to keep the species viable,” explains MARP Stranding Coordinator Jennifer Dittmar. “When this loggerhead came to us it was unlikely to survive much less continue to propagate its species. Now that it is healthy, we have every reason to believe that it will be successful in its natural environment.”

To track the turtle’s progress, the Aquarium fitted it with a satellite tag, funded by the Shared Earth Foundation, which will transmit information about its location and speed. These tags help researchers learn more about sea turtle migration and travel patterns. The public is invited to follow the turtle’s progress by viewing a satellite map of its travels on the Aquarium’s website at <http://www.aqua.org/trackflightandrelease.html>. Information will be gathered until the adhesive fails and the tag falls off.

Representatives from the Shared Earth Foundation named the loggerhead “*Flight and Release*” as the turtle was expected to be flown to Florida for release earlier in its rehab until ongoing health conditions prevented it from being released in that manner.

**About “*Flight and Release*”:**

On July 25, 2008 the Aquarium’s MARP team responded to a call from the United States Coast Guard in Ocean City, Maryland about a loggerhead sea turtle in distress. The turtle was found floating in the Ocean City inlet and was unable to dive properly, putting it at risk of becoming injured by a boat. MARP staff responded and transported the animal to Baltimore for rehabilitation.

Back at the Aquarium, the MARP team removed nearly 10 pounds of organisms from the turtle’s shell. Once the shell was smooth and clean the turtle was able to dive and feed properly, but was still severely underweight. During its year-long rehabilitation the loggerhead ate a diet of capelin, squid, and blue crabs. Sea turtles will commonly feed on blue crabs in the Chesapeake Bay, and this turtle was no exception – crabs are one of its favorite treats. The turtle gained nearly 26 pounds while in

rehab, and was released at an ideal weight of 90 pounds. Aquarium staff determined that the turtle is a young adult, and though it has yet to reach full sexual maturity, the size of its tail indicates it is most likely female.

For better insight into the depth and extent of the shell infections that plagued this turtle so many months, the Aquarium's veterinary team called on the help of the radiology staff at John's Hopkins Hospital. The staff at Hopkins volunteered their time after hours so the Aquarium's vets could investigate the turtle's shell through two separate CT scans. The shell wounds were eventually healed with antibiotics.

Loggerheads are among the six sea turtle species found in U.S. waters and fall under the joint jurisdiction of NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Because they are classified as a "threatened" species by the Endangered Species Act, the rehabilitation of even one turtle is important to protecting them.

This is the 82<sup>nd</sup> animal released by the National Aquarium. Formed in 1991 and staffed almost entirely by volunteers, the Marine Animal Rescue program has responded to hundreds of strandings, including seals, dolphins and endangered sea turtles, and to sightings of manatees, dolphins and other marine mammals.

The Aquarium is committed to protecting and rehabilitating sea turtles and needs public support to continue this important work. The MARP program is funded solely by grants and the rescue, rehabilitation and release of just one marine animal can cost the program up to \$50,000. Donations can be made via mail or on the Aquarium's website at:

<http://www.aqua.org/makeadifference/marp.html>

The National Aquarium, a non-profit organization, is Maryland's most exciting and popular cultural attraction, as well as one of the region's leading conservation and education resources. For close to three decades, it has been a symbol of urban renewal, an economic anchor for the region and a source of pride for Marylanders. It has enjoyed strong, reliable attendance since opening on August 8, 1981. With original attendance projections of 650,000 visitors per year, the National Aquarium has welcomed an average annual attendance of 1.5 million over the past 10 years. Through transforming experiences, the National Aquarium inspires people to enjoy, respect, and protect the aquatic world. It is dedicated to education and conservation through more than a dozen programs that serve the environment at the community.

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