

The Turtle Hospital

Located in Marathon, Florida at MM 48.5, The Turtle Hospital is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation, education, and environmental legislation of sea turtles. Established in 1986, The Turtle Hospital is the only state-certified veterinary hospital in the world for sea turtles.

Guided educational experiences are held throughout the day, seven days a week (reservations for these tours recommended) that educate the public on sea turtles. These consist of an informative presentation, a tour including a visit to the receiving and x-ray room, operating room, and meeting the turtles who reside in the hospital's tanks and saltwater pool.

Local volunteers assist with feeding and caring for the turtles, and many veterinarians—both local and non-local—also contribute their time and expertise. A good portion of the state-of-the-art equipment needed for surgeries has been donated by local hospitals and doctors, as well as by environmentally friendly organizations and individuals.

The Hidden Harbor Motel solely funded The Turtle Hospital until 2005 when Hurricane Wilma caused the motel to close. Grant and foundation money, personal donations, guided educational experiences, and gift shop sales now fund the hospital.

There are seven species of sea turtles found worldwide, and five of these turtles are found in the Florida Keys. All five of these turtles are on the endangered list: the Green sea turtle, Hawksbill, Leatherback, Kemp's Ridley, and the Loggerhead turtle.

A variety of illnesses are treated at the hospital, including amputations of flippers caused by entanglements from line and garbage, shell damage from boat collisions, and ingestion of foreign objects such as plastic bags, food wrappers, and fishing line.

The most common surgery done at the hospital is the removal of debilitating viral tumors called Fibropapilloma. This disease affects more than half of the population of young Green sea turtles located in the Florida Keys and is found in Green sea turtle populations worldwide. The Turtle Hospital, along with the University of Florida and Albert Einstein College of Medicine, is actively researching the causes of Fibropapilloma.

Every summer, The Turtle Hospital receives more than 100 injured and/or disoriented hatchling sea turtles. The hospital also receives an average of 70 injured sea turtles every year. Each sea turtle brought to the hospital is rehabilitated and released back into the wild as soon as possible. At this time, the hospital has rehabilitated and released more than 1,500 sea turtles.

Fascinating Facts on Sea Turtles:

- Sea turtles have inhabited the oceans for over 200 million years
- Sea turtles front flippers are so powerful they can sail through the ocean at speeds of up to 25 miles per hour

- When swimming and feeding sea turtles breath air every 5 to 10 minutes
- When resting sea turtles can hold their breath for up to 3 to 5 hours
- Sea turtles are believed to live for more than 75 years
- Five out of the seven species of sea turtles can be found in the Florida Keys
 - Loggerhead
 - Green sea turtle
 - Hawksbill
 - Leatherback
 - Kemps Ridley
- All seven species are on the endangered species list and are listed as protected

Threats to Sea Turtles Include:

- Entanglement in monofilament (fishing line), ropes and nets
- Boat collisions
- Oil spills and tar
- Intestinal impaction
- Coastal development
- Fibropapilloma tumors

What We Can Do to Help Lessen the Threats to These Magnificent Animals Include:

- Throwing all trash into receptacles—whether you're on land or the ocean. Even trash thrown on the ground can make its way into the water. And, things such as plastic bags floating in the water look like a jellyfish to these wonderful creatures.
- Keep an eye out for turtles when boating, and enjoy watching them from afar.
- During nesting season, keep all lights facing the beach turned off so as not to confuse them, keep dogs off areas where they nest, do not light fires on the beach, and please do not disturb a female who is nesting or sea turtle nests.
- Help protect sea turtles by donating to an organization that rescues, rehabilitates, and releases them.

If you find a sick or injured sea turtle, please call the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission at 1-888-404-FWCC. Do not try to touch the turtle yourself—since they are a protected species you must have a permit issued by the State of Florida to work with them.

For a fabulous and educational experience of these incredible creatures stop in and visit The Turtle Hospital when you're in the Florida Keys.

For more information on The Turtle Hospital, go to www.turtlehospital.org where you will find such things as Adopting a Turtle, Reporting an injured turtle, the webcam, and monthly newsletter.

Note: this article can be found on <http://www.escape-floridakeys.com/Turtle-Hospital.aspx> and published in the Turtle Hospital newsletter in the Spring 2012 edition.