

A Little Glue, Fiberglass Fix Injured Turtle's Shell

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3-4 minutes

INDIAN HARBOUR BEACH — A volunteer medical crew worked for three hours Wednesday -- using glue and fiberglass -- to save a severely injured sea turtle rescued last week with its shell almost shattered from being hit by a boat.

Indian Harbour Beach veterinarian Joe Fuller and sea turtle activists said they were amazed the female loggerhead survived the boat collision, which cracked open the turtle's shell in a half-dozen places and caved in a portion of it. The turtle's organs were exposed, and it was suffering some internal bleeding.

The 25-year-old turtle was covered with 2 inches of barnacles, algae and blood-sucking worms on its flippers, head and shell when it washed ashore Friday in Cocoa Beach. Turtles usually attract barnacles only to their shells, but the injured turtle has been inactive while floating in the ocean for almost a month, estimated Sea Turtle Preservation Society president Peter Bandre.

Since Friday, the turtle has been kept in a 500-gallon tank at the Sea Turtle Preservation Society's headquarters in Melbourne Beach.

The 100-pound turtle has not eaten and has lost about 100 pounds during the ordeal. A 25-year-old turtle normally weighs about 200 pounds.

With an acrylic epoxy used to repair horse hooves, Fuller and other volunteers worked for three hours Wednesday to piece the shell back together. A large crack through the center of the shell could not be joined, so Fuller used fiberglass resin and a special gauze tape that hardens into a cast to bridge the two sides.

Turtle shells, which are attached to the turtle's internal membranes and organs, are similar to bones. They naturally grow back together.

"This one might always have to be a pet," said Fuller, a vet at South Patrick Animal Hospital who donates supplies and medical care for injured turtles. "We'll just have to wait and see what happens underneath in the next three to four months."

Judging from the shell's damage, the hull of a power boat rammed into it just as the turtle was surfacing for air.

Other turtles found with similar injuries died almost immediately, Bandre said.

Bandre and other society volunteers returned the turtle to a salt-water tank Wednesday afternoon and hoped it would begin eating. If not, it will be force-fed through a tube in its stomach.

If the turtle begins eating on its own, it will be transferred to Marineland near St. Augustine in the next week to recuperate.

In a year, it could be released into the wild, Bandre said.

Fuller has repaired shells on three turtles, but they had only minor cracks, he said.

One died of pneumonia; the others were released into the wild.

Besides Fuller, Holmes Regional Medical Center in Melbourne also donated medical supplies for the repair job, and one of its staff pharmacists, Pat Meyer, assisted during the procedure.