

## Once Near Death, Sea Turtles Get Fresh Beginning

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### Found Badly Injured Or Ailing, The Now-healthy Creatures Are Doing Swimmingly.

COCOA BEACH - They once had a host of miseries, but the five sea turtles released Wednesday into the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian River Lagoon were fit and hearty.

"They all should have an excellent chance of survival. We don't plan on seeing them again," said Michelle Bauer, an aquarist at SeaWorld Orlando, where the five were treated.

First to go home was a large loggerhead brought to SeaWorld in October after members of the Indian River Fire Department found it floating on the lagoon surface.

Exploratory surgery showed a tear in the reptile's lung, which was allowing air to escape into its body cavity. It wasn't eating and was near death. The tear was repaired, and the turtle, quite hefty now, was ready Wednesday to return to its natural habitat.

SeaWorld workers released it into the Banana River along the State Road 520 causeway, followed quickly by a delicate-looking green sea turtle. The petite juvenile was brought to SeaWorld on Jan. 1 with pneumonia.

Three turtles were released at the end of S.R. 520 into the Atlantic, and several of their rescuers were on hand to wave goodbye.

One onlooker was Missy Gann, who has done her share of lifesaving as a nurse on First Flight, Holmes Regional Medical Center's emergency airlift helicopter.

Gann checked over the young green turtle she and friend Rich Wiederhold rescued in Cocoa Beach in January.

"We thought it was dead and so did other people who walked by," she said.

But Wiederhold turned over the animal, which had monofilament line tangled around its head and flippers.

“At the bottom of its throat you could see a little movement, so I knew he was alive,” Gann said. Wiederhold untangled the line and carried him down to the surf.

They called for help, and a member of the Sea Turtle Preservation Society took the animal to Orlando.

“This animal had probably been tangled in the line for quite some time because he was covered in barnacles,” Bauer said.

One section of the line had cut through a flipper to the bone. The flipper had to be amputated because of the infection.

Bauer said the loss of the flipper should not slow the animal down in its natural environment.

Five additional turtles will be released around the state in the next week, Bauer said.

Last year, SeaWorld took in 45 injured turtles, and this year 15 have been referred for rehabilitation.

The best thing people can do to help the animals is to protect their environment.

“When you’re out on the river or ocean, pick up trash, old fishing line, crab traps, those are the kinds of things that get the turtles in trouble,” she said.