dead, dying, and debilitated sea turtles wash ashore along the 300 miles of ocean and lagoon shoreline of Brevard County, Florida, U.S.A., about 160 times a year, with 47 percent of the affected animals requiring transport to a rescue or rehabilitation facility that may be hours away. Such journeys are logistically complex and carry a number of risks for both the turtles and their rescuers. Founded in 1984, the Sea Turtle Preservation Society (STPS) has 25 permitted volunteers who regularly transport stranded turtles in Brevard County. Drawing on the experiences of this team and on advice from Drs. Craig Peolton and Charles Manire, who are qualified sea turtle veterinarians, STPS developed a set of best practices for transporting disabled turtles while mitigating some of the risks.

The effort began by meeting with veterinarians and rehabilitation staff members at a number of facilities and by interviewing experts at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to gather background information about the most important equipment, tools, and techniques to use for safe transportation of injured turtles. Because most of STPS’s first responders are local volunteers who may see only a few strandings per year and for whom specialized equipment is unaffordable or impractical, STPS’s best practices guidelines focus on the use of cost-effective tools that are readily available to the public.

BEST PRACTICES FOR SAFE TURTLE TRANSPORT

Rehabilitation facilities have professional medical staff members and specialized equipment to care for turtles once they are on site. Thus, the greatest challenge is often ensuring that the turtles get from the stranding site to the facilities without creating more problems. Transporting the turtles can mean confronting a gauntlet of backbreaking lifting, loading, and long drives over difficult terrain in open air or hot vehicles—all factors that can stress and cause internal injuries to a turtle if not performed properly.

Moving a weak or injured turtle weighing as much as 200 pounds from the ocean or shore and into a vehicle can harm both the turtle and the person trying to help; if done incorrectly, simply lifting the animal can result in distress and potentially serious injuries. In some cases, veterinarians have noted that injuries to turtles that occurred during rescue and that transport may have contributed to the animal’s death.

STPS created a visual aid program to educate volunteers about the most common situations that one may encounter. In the video, one can review the best techniques for moving turtles, for making them comfortable, and for securing them during transport. Emphasis is placed on the importance of proper lifting, the use of appropriate containers and padding, and the monitoring of the animal’s core body temperature during transport.

First, it is best to avoid lifting turtles. Instead, one should find a flat surface beneath the animal, is very important. One should always avoid lifting a turtle by the carapace alone because the plastron bones (the hypoplastron or xiphiplastron) can actually puncture the heart and other organs if improper pressures are applied. It is further recommended to keep the animal flat and to prevent the turtle from moving during transport.

Second, maintaining the core body temperature of a rescued turtle is important. Medical staff members prefer that temperature remain relatively constant. If the turtle has been in the sun for an extended time, cooling it slowly may be required during transport. Similarly, if the animal is cold, warming it must be extremely gradual to avoid shock. Transporters are trained in the proper techniques for maintaining core temperatures by using towels and water. When questions or problems arise, the transporters know how to contact FWC, and they remain in contact with the designated treatment facility during transport to give the facility reliable estimated times of arrival and updates on the turtle’s condition.

A POWERFUL AMPLIFIER FOR CONSERVATION

Following these simple guidelines has improved the success of STPS’s sea turtle rescue program with little additional cost. Although most concerns in the sea turtle conservation community revolve around addressing population and species-level threats, it is also important to help the individual victims of ingested plastic, climate change-induced cold snaps, and other threats that injure or kill turtles on our shores every year. When local residents and tourists know that a dedicated team of trained and committed turtle rescue professionals is just a phone call away, such knowledge can act as a powerful amplifier for the success of sea turtle conservation on all levels.

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