

Little Turtle Makes Big Splash

A tiny loggerhead sea turtle made a big splash at the Aquarium. Its shell and skin are various shades of white, rather than the normal dark brown and gray. Visitors can see the white loggerhead now with other hatchlings in the Loggerhead Odyssey exhibit.

"The Aquarium is extraordinarily fortunate to be able to care for such a rare animal," said Husbandry Curator Brian Dorn. "We are excited and hopeful that this little loggerhead lives a long and happy life. The tiny turtle will be a big boost in furthering educational efforts about sea turtles. When a rarity like this presents itself, it allows us to magnify our conservation message for these amazing ocean reptiles," he said.

The loggerhead's unusual coloring is a rare genetic alteration similar to albinism. The turtle is not a true albino, which means an animal that lacks all pigment. The turtle has some variations in shading and has dark eyes instead of the trademark pink or red eyes found in albinos.

Young sea turtles spend the first two to three years of their lives in mats of sargassum seaweed far offshore, so the rate of occurrence for the turtle's condition is unknown. However, sea turtles that lack normal coloring likely do not survive long in the wild. They are more vulnerable to predators without their natural camouflage and often have other genetic abnormalities.

After a month of sorting through hundreds of suggestions, the aquarium has named this white sea turtle hatchling Nimbus. Aquarium staff said the name, which means a radiant light or a shining cloud, is fitting for the tiny loggerhead for reasons in addition to its rare pale coloring. The turtle has become a beacon for heightened public interest in sea turtles, which can help advance conservation efforts. The five sea turtle species that frequent North Carolina waters are considered endangered or threatened.

The turtle was brought to the Aquarium for care on August 11. Volunteers working with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission found the turtle when they excavated a nest on a Pine Knoll Shores beach. Because loggerheads are a threatened species, the Wildlife Resources Commission and a network of trained volunteers monitor nests and check for weak hatchlings left behind.

Sea turtles lay 80 to 130 eggs per nest, buried deep in the beach sand. The eggs in a nest typically hatch almost simultaneously. The babies then collectively claw their way to the surface and dash to the ocean. Those at the bottom or others that miss

out on the group effort for some reason face an almost impossible task without intervention. Each year, the aquarium cares for several hatchlings from excavated nests until they are strong enough to be released.

"Had the white baby managed to dig itself out, it would have met daunting challenges in the wild. Predators on the beach and in the sea could more easily spy a white hatchling. Its pale skin also would make it more susceptible to the harmful effects of the sun's rays," said Dr. Eric Anderson, a zoological medicine resident with the NC State University College of Veterinary Medicine, which provides medical services for the aquarium's animals.

The hatchling also has a cleft palate and a malformed beak. Dr. Anderson said no life-threatening conditions have been diagnosed, but more deformities might become apparent as the loggerhead grows. "With these animals, when you find one genetic or developmental abnormality, often there are other abnormalities as well," he said. Because of its known conditions and the potential for more, its future is difficult to predict—even with the aquarium's care and medical attention. "It's going to be a long road, but we are hopeful that it will do well," he said.

The turtle has overcome some of its obvious problems, said Michele Lamping, an aquarist who cares for the white turtle and other hatchlings. It initially had to be coaxed into eating its rations of mysis shrimp, possibly because of the cleft palate. "Now it's eating on its own," she said, "just a little slower than the others. It takes it a little longer to swallow."

It also struggled to surface for air during its first attempt at swimming, but has since mastered the skill. Sea turtles spend their entire lives in the water, except for those few minutes after hatching and when females come ashore to nest. The white hatchling's gender has not been determined.

Since arrival, it grew from its initial 16 grams—a little more than a half an ounce—to about 28 grams. The hatchling was smaller than average on arrival and its growth rate lags about 50 percent behind that of other rescued hatchlings its age. "Still, its growth is an encouraging sign," Lamping said. The hatchling is energetic and active. "It's holding its own. Despite its many disabilities, it is strong and continues to surprise us every day. You can watch Nimbus swimming and resting in the hatchling exhibit in the Tidal Waters Gallery."



*A monthly report
by Town Manager
Brian Kramer on
events in town.*

Pine Knoll Shores & Atlantic Beach Water System Connection Put to Test.

As you may recall from last year, Pine Knoll Shores and Atlantic Beach agreed to physically connect our water systems. This is a good back-up for us and offers both towns some assurance of water availability should something happen that would cause us to shut down our wells temporarily. During the week of February 7, this connection was put to use. We provided Atlantic Beach with just over half-a-million gallons of water while they conducted maintenance on their system.

Providing Incentives to Recycle.

We are looking at ways to encourage our property owners to recycle more. Last month, we took a ride to the recycling plant near Raleigh to observe how material we recycle is actually separated and processed. So allow me to use this opportunity to assure everyone that the material you leave out for recycling twice a month is in fact being recycled. We are now trying to figure out how to get folks to recycle more.

Mimosa Bridge Update.

Engineers have completed the environmental impact document. It is awaiting Department of Transportation (DOT) approval. Once this approval is granted, we will move on to the full design phase. A reminder to all that you may view the 20% design illustration at the town Web site at www.townofpks.com/documents/Miscellaneous/Mimosa%20Bridge%20exhibit.PDF

Formation of the PKS Pedestrian Task Force.

Last year, Pine Knoll Shores adopted a Pedestrian Master Plan. This is the document that outlines a plan to have a sidewalk system someday on Salter Path Road. One of the steps outlined in is the formation of a Pedestrian Task Force. We will soon form this group and try to find ways to plan for the funding and proper design of these walkways.

Next Dinner with the Mayor.

The next dinner with the mayor will be on Friday April 15 (correction from last month), at 5:30 p.m. The location is to be determined.

PKS Recreation Card.

Each month, I will use this space to list those businesses working with the town to provide discounts to holders of the PKS Rec Card. Here is the current listing:

- Country Club of the Crystal Coast
- Globe Kids & Gals, Atlantic Station
- Ernie's Gifts, Atlantic Station
- Milazzo (Restaurant), Atlantic Beach Sheraton
- Molly's (Restaurant), Atlantic Beach Sheraton
- The Old Beaufort Shop