



“Protecting the **habitat** of sea turtles is equivalent to protecting the habitats of thousands of species—whales, sharks, seabirds, sea flora, even humans...”

—Dr. Sylvia Earle, Executive Director, Global Marine Division, Conservation International

Hope on the Horizon— Three Success Stories in the Making

Conservation by Cooperation in the Eastern Pacific

Dedication. Passion. Love of nature. Some say such words are overly sentimental. Some say that deep personal relationships get in the way of one's goals, that it is hard to maintain one's status as a respectable scientist and also be an effective advocate for the ocean, and that to restore nature is only a matter of dollars and enforcement.

Some wholeheartedly disagree. If we are to repair what is broken in nature, to replace its still-beating heart, it will take a revolution full of passionate celebration and commitment to each other.

On the Baja California peninsula, in the towns along its shores, you'll find the heart of that ocean revolution. The Grupo Tortuguero is a prime example of a community of people coming together to do what they feel is right, regardless of economics and short-term personal benefits. The killing of sea turtles for food had always been a boon for the fisher people of northwest Mexico, and the laws designed to control turtle hunting were seldom (if ever) enforced. Yet many people have made a conscious choice to change their behavior and to band together to preserve their natural heritage, celebrating the ocean and its potential for abundance.



Rodrigo Rangel, Grupo Tortuguero Coordinator, releases a black turtle in Bahía Magdalena, Baja California Sur, in March 2003.
© W. J. NICHOLS

In 1999, a group of fishers, coastal residents, scientists and conservationists in Baja California united to form the Grupo Tortuguero (www.grupotortuguero.org). Their objective was and is to use on-the-ground action to address the main threats to sea turtles in this region of the world—poaching for eggs and meat, and incidental capture in fishing nets, by trawls, and on longlines—and to recover the populations of the five species in the Eastern Pacific.

The Grupo Tortuguero now represents more than 25 coastal communities and a dozen sea turtle monitoring projects. Activities include nesting

beach and in-water monitoring, biannual meetings, sea turtle festivals, publications, distribution of educational materials, and maintenance of connectivity between the various approaches to sea turtle conservation in the region. Perhaps its most important victory has been its continual reminder to concerned individuals that they are not alone—that we can all work together as part of a creative, evolving, and thriving conservation movement.

Wallace J. Nichols, Ph.D. is Director of Conservation Science at ProPeninsula, Co-Director of Ocean Revolution, a Research Associate at the California Academy of Science, and Vice Co-Chair of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group, North East Pacific Region (j@oceanrevolution.org). He really likes turtles.

The Return of the Kemp's Ridley to Texas Shores

By the 1970s, due to decades of over-hunting and collecting, the Kemp's Ridley was suffering the closest brush with extinction that any sea turtle species had endured; the species narrowly sidestepped this disaster. An ambitious and risky conservation experiment spearheaded by a joint Mexico-U.S. team from 1978 to the present has not only stopped the killing but also helped to reestablish historic nesting grounds for the species in Texas.

Kemp's Ridelys nest primarily on one small stretch of beach in northeastern Mexico near the small town of Rancho Nuevo, and while historical records indicate that their nesting once extended north along Texas' Gulf of Mexico coast, only about one Kemp's Ridley nest was found every three years on Texas shores from the late 1940s through the mid-1990s. Experts felt that it was critical to expand the Kemp's Ridley's once-extensive nesting range in order to reduce the risk of losing the entire global population to a natural or human-caused disaster at Rancho Nuevo.

On the basis of the best available science of the day, scientists carefully gathered eggs from nesting turtles in Mexico, buried them in Texas sand (flown in from North Padre Island, Texas), then gingerly transported them by aircraft back to Padre Island National Seashore on North Padre, where incubation was completed and the hatchling turtles were allowed to scurry down the beach and into the shallows. After a few moments of imprinting on their new natal shores, the hatchlings were



A Kemp's Ridley hatchling. © THANE WIBBELS

then scooped up and flown to holding pens in Galveston, Texas, where they were hand-reared for a year. These “head-started” turtles, now too large for most predators, were released into the Gulf

of Mexico with fingers crossed and hopes that they would find their way back to Texas shores after reaching adulthood.

Sure enough, they have returned, and they may have brought others with them. More research is needed to determine whether the wild turtles have followed the head-started turtles back to Texas, or whether the turtles nesting in Texas are simply a result of the increased population at Rancho Nuevo. The number of Texas nests has increased throughout the past decade, and a record 51 were recorded during 2005. About 55 percent of Kemp's Ridley nests found in the U.S.A. are at Padre Island National Seashore, but nesting is also increasing on other Texas beaches. Kemp's Ridelys nesting in Texas today are a mixture of returnees from the experimental imprinting and head-starting projects and turtles from wild stock. As the Kemp's Ridley population continues to recover and more turtles and their offspring reach maturity, all signs indicate that the number of nesting Kemp's Ridelys in Texas will continue to grow.

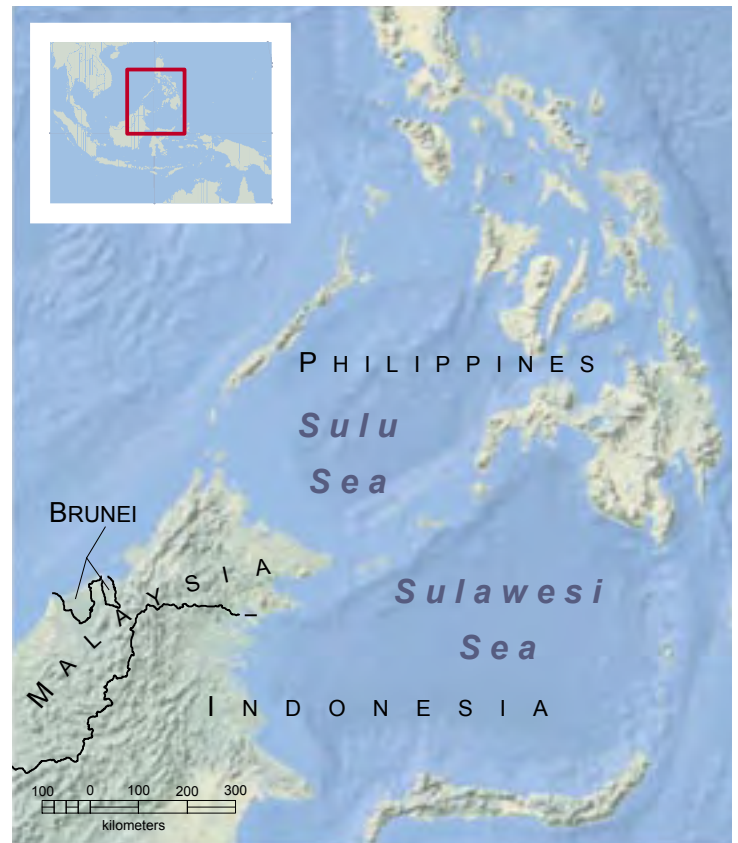
While recovery is still far from absolute, thanks to the visionary and bold actions of that bi-national team of conservationists and scientists, Kemp's Ridelys are slowly, albeit steadily, on the rise.

Donna J. Shaver is Chief of the Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery at the Padre Island National Seashore.

Roderic B. Mast is Vice President of Conservation International in Washington, DC, and Co-Chair of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group.

Sulu-Sulawesi Seascape— A New Precedent in Marine Conservation

Protected area strategies that have been time-tested and have proven successful for terrestrial organisms are not necessarily conducive to the conservation of wide-ranging, migratory species like sea turtles. Whereas a fence can be built around the entire global distribution of an endangered plant or amphibian on land, such is not the case with a sea turtle that may nest on beaches in Japan, feed along the coast of Mexico, and range the entire Pacific basin in between. Modern knowledge of ocean processes has provided overwhelming evidence of the importance of large-scale strategies for marine conservation. In recent years, a new wave of attention to conservation designs that address entire seascapes has taken hold and become a necessary and urgent component of global efforts to conserve marine biodiversity and wide-ranging animals like sea turtles. The Sulu-Sulawesi Seascape is one of the first efforts to create such a large marine management regime, and sea turtles have been a critical consideration in its design.



The Sulu-Sulawesi Seascape. © CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

This seascape encompasses the entire Sulu and Sulawesi Seas, an area of 1 million square kilometers, spanning parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This vast marine region, often referred to as the “coral triangle,” is the global epicenter of diversity for corals and other important marine taxa; moreover, it is home to five species of nesting, foraging, and migrating sea turtles. And the Sulu-Sulawesi Seascape supports the livelihoods of approximately 35 million people from at least 50 cultural groups whose lives are tied to the fishing, tourism, and international shipping industries.

In February 2004, during the Convention on Biological Diversity's Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the three governments of this region agreed upon an inter-governmental management plan for the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas. The agreement's long-term conservation strategy is both comprehensive and specific, taking into account the region's complete range of social and biological considerations.

These plans call for a Tri-National Sea Turtle Conservation Program and the management of a large marine corridor that encompasses known feeding grounds for leatherbacks and loggerheads and that protects the largest aggregations of green and hawksbill turtles in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region, with more than 10,000 nesting turtles per year.

To support the implementation of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seascape conservation plan, Conservation International announced in June 2005 a grant of roughly US\$3 million per year for three years. This new initiative represents a tremendous step forward for marine conservation.

Romeo Trono is the Country Executive Director of Conservation International's Philippines Program and a member of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group.