

GIANT LEATHERBACK SEATURTLE RECEIVES URGENT MEDICAL CARE AT NEW ENGLAND AQUARIUM

*Historic patient remains critical,
but is showing signs of improvement*

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BOSTON, MA. The New England Aquarium is providing medical treatment to an endangered 374-pound, juvenile leatherback seaturtle in its on-site rescue and rehabilitation facility. This marks the first time in 30 years that a live leatherback has been brought to the New England Aquarium. If rehabilitation efforts succeed, this may be only the second leatherback in history to be successfully rehabilitated in a captive situation and returned to the wild, and the first for the New England Aquarium.

The leatherback seaturtle was first discovered near Corporation Beach in Dennis, MA, on Halloween evening. A brief examination revealed no obvious signs of injury, and the seaturtle was returned to the water. By the following morning, the turtle had stranded a second time, and the decision was made to bring the five-foot-long, 374-pound endangered seaturtle to the New England Aquarium for additional medical treatment and rehabilitation for eventual release. The leatherback seaturtle arrived at the Aquarium shortly after 6 p.m. on November 1, 2005.

Leatherbacks are highly adapted for life in the open ocean, which makes them difficult to maintain in captive situations. They do not comprehend barriers well, and may swim continuously into the walls of their enclosure, resulting in abrasions and possible injury. They eat a specialized diet of mostly sea jellies. Finally, leatherbacks are enormous and not well understood. For all of these reasons, leatherbacks make for challenging rehabilitation patients.

Despite the odds, the leatherback is beginning to show signs of improvement under the 24-hour care of the New England Aquarium's veterinary and rehabilitation staff. The seaturtle is being given fluids supplemented with calcium, electrolytes and sugars to counteract dehydration and low calcium, glucose and electrolyte levels. In addition, the turtle is being given preventative antibiotics, and is being treated for parasites. The turtle's blood levels are beginning to improve, and its activity levels are increasing. The turtle, however, remains in critical medical condition.

The leatherback sea turtle is currently housed in a 3,600 gallon pool in the New England Aquarium's on-site rescue and rehabilitation facility. The turtle is wearing a custom harness assembled by Aquarium staff and volunteers out of felt-like car-wash strips. This harness is attached by a short leash to a T-bar support system that was installed above the turtle's pool on November 2. This system allows the sea turtle some degree of movement, and prevents the animal from colliding with the sides of its enclosure.

Unlike other sea turtles, leatherbacks are covered by a leathery skin similar to mammalian skin, and they can easily injure their delicate skin on rough walls, straps or buckles. The felt-like material of the harness does not abrade the turtle's skin, and all buckles and straps are carefully placed to eliminate any possibility of direct contact with the sea turtle.

Aquarium veterinary and rehabilitation staff still do not know why the animal stranded, and additional medical tests are necessary before a definitive diagnosis will be available. For now, the leatherback sea turtle must remain under 24-hour observation. The 374 pound animal may need immediate medical attention at any time, and for this reason, each 4-hour shift includes a minimum of two trained and experienced Aquarium staff or volunteers.

Leatherback sea turtles are the largest species of turtle in the world. Mature individuals may reach more than 8 feet in length, and can weigh over a ton. Despite their size, leatherbacks eat primarily jellies and other soft-bodied sea creatures. The critically endangered leatherback is threatened by poaching for their meat and eggs, ship strikes and accidental drowning associated with fishing gear entanglements. Leatherbacks are extremely uncommon in captive situations, and the New England Aquarium's talented staff of veterinarians and rehabilitation specialists are pushing the limits of knowledge with this species. Every moment working with this unique and historic patient is a learning experience for all involved.

The New England Aquarium's Rescue and Rehabilitation Program has responded to more than 4,000 reports of stranded marine mammals and sea turtles since its inception in 1968. The New England Aquarium responds to strandings over more than 2,500 miles of coastline, from Massachusetts through Maine.

Visit www.neaq.org/leatherback for updates and publication-quality images.