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# Two Oceans Aquarium's juvenile loggerhead turtles return to iSimangaliso Wetland Park

STARTS The Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation's Turtle Conservation Centre is thrilled to announce that 12 of the 605 loggerhead turtle hatchlings that stranded on Western Cape beaches in April have been tagged and released back in the warm waters of Bokkie into the Marine Protected Area of iSimangaliso Wetland Park, near their natal beaches. This collaborative effort is exciting for the Turtle Conservation Centre, with a chance to develop the existing turtle conservation work being done in the area, in South Africa and beyond our shores.

"We have had a very busy year at the Turtle Conservation Centre with a record number of loggerhead turtle hatchlings stranding on Western Cape beaches. After many months of rehabilitation, it is incredibly special to be able to return healthy juveniles back to the warm waters of KZN, close to the beaches that they hatched on," said Talitha Noble-Trull, Turtle Conservation Centre Manager.

The Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation has been collaborating closely with Upwell Turtles, a US-based international sea turtle conservation organization, leading the "Lost Years Initiative", an international collaborative effort to document and understand the movements and behaviours of early-stage sea turtles during their most enigmatic life history stages. Staff from Upwell and the Turtle Conservation Centre tagged the turtles at the two Oceans Aquarium.

The turtles were then transported to Durban. From there SAAMBR assisted with the last leg of their journey to Sodwana Bay MPA in iSimangaliso. An expert team made up of Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation, SAAMBR, iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority in partnership with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, and Upwell representatives escorted the 12 post-hatchlings onto the release boat. The turtles were released one by one from the boat into the open ocean, as the team cheered them on their way.

"iSimangaliso is home to the RAMSAR site known as the Coral Reef and Turtle Beaches of Tongaland, a key part of the iSimangaliso Marine Protected Area. As iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority we are elated with the decision to have the turtle hatchlings released here. These iconic ecosystems and species are central to our conservation mission. Each year, we monitor turtle nesting activity and work diligently to ensure that hatchlings make their way safely back to the ocean. It is a privilege to witness moments like the release of these 12 juvenile turtles, having travelled far to find sanctuary in iSimangaliso. They inspire us, strengthening our commitment to conservation in South Africa", said iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority Acting CEO Ms Keletso Tembe.

"Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife has a long, rich, and proud history associated with sea turtle conservation in South Africa. Having invested over 60 years in active sea turtle protection and conservation, we take immense pride in continuing collaborations that contribute to the survival of these species. We fully appreciate the efforts that South African aquaria invest in sea turtle rehabilitation, and for our part, we will continue to strive to ensure that we have the necessary receiving environments ready to accept them safely," said Santosh Bachoo, Regional Marine Ecologist Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

Every year, the Turtle Conservation Centre admits hatchling turtles (mainly loggerheads) that are swept along the Agulhas Current from the northern coast of KwaZulu-Natal towards the cold Benguela Current near the Western Cape. Cold water, rough seas, dehydration, and predation cause many of these turtles to be washed ashore in the Southern and Western Cape.

"Weighing anything between 30g and 100g, these hatchlings are powerless to stop themselves from becoming swept up in the rough seas and spat out into the colder waters along the Western Cape coast, where the current turns," explained Ayesha Cornelius, Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation Sea Turtle Aquarist.

This year the Turtle Conservation Centre saw a record number of turtle hatchlings stranding on Western Cape beaches and in need of rescue and rehabilitation. The rough seas, intense winds, and driving rain experienced in the Western Cape this April brought in waves of stranded turtle hatchlings – far exceeding the numbers that our Turtle Conservation Centre normally expects for this time of year. The previous record for the number of hatchlings stranded in a season was 250. This year that was shattered with a total of 605 hatchlings rescued and in need of rehabilitation.

The turtles are fully rehabilitated before being released back into warmer waters. To ensure this, expensive rehabilitation techniques are needed including life support, expert medical care and around the clock monitoring. Ranging in size from 20g to 80kg, each turtle's rehabilitation journey is unique and can take from a couple of months to many years, depending on individual needs. Thanks to the generous sponsorship from FNB Care, 10 of these hatchlings were given a second chance of a healthy life in the wild.

Each loggerhead turtle released was fitted with the latest generation of Lotek micro-satellite tag technology that Upwell has been deploying and refining with partners over the last six years on juvenile turtles of various species and sizes. Since 2021, Upwell has tagged over 224 juvenile turtles to collect data that helps researchers and conservationists better understand juvenile turtle movements, behaviour, and habitat use during this vulnerable life phase.

Upwell's Executive Director and research lead, Dr George Shillinger noted, "This collaborative juvenile loggerhead tracking research is a core component of Upwell's work and will reveal fascinating new insights regarding this enigmatic and poorly understood sea turtle life history phase. It is our hope and mission to see this data applied to address critical knowledge gaps and to inform management decisions and actions that will serve to protect vulnerable early-stage turtles. This data also corroborates the efficacy and importance of the outstanding rescue and rehabilitation work led by the Turtle Conservation Centre, particularly as they contend with increasing numbers of sea turtle strandings along the Western Cape."

The tags, which look like little boxes with aerials, are attached to the carapace (shell) of the turtle using a technique developed by Dr Jeanette Wyneken at Florida Atlantic University, including an acrylic adhesive, silicon, and neoprene.

Each tag will collect position data, and some tags will also be equipped with pressure sensors for provision of dive data, such as depth. The tags will transmit archived data opportunistically when turtles surface to breathe, during predefined intervals when it is more likely that a satellite will be crossing over the turtle's path. The tags can transmit for approximately three months, depending on the solar-powered batteries' longevity, and are designed to fall off the turtle's carapace as it grows.

"To send off 12 of the hundreds of hatchlings that the Turtle Conservation Centre received in April this year, has been an important step in a long journey for the Turtle Conservation Centre. Although the Centre has undergone unprecedented pressures this year, it is exciting to have the opportunity to achieve research progress by tagging a number of these turtles. Doing this will allow us to better understand the movements of turtles during a period of their development known as the 'lost years', an inspiring prospect!" said Noble-Trull. Many of the sea turtles suffer from complications caused by ingesting plastic. Gaining insight into the life cycle of loggerhead turtles through the satellite tags will, hopefully, shed some light on where turtles are affected by these pollutants. Releasing the turtles into the largest MPA in South Africa will shed light on the value of MPAs to the conservation of marine species.