

Column for week beginning February 13, 2006

SEA GRANT

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One of the unheralded success stories in endangered species management continues to develop with little notice. The endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtle population has been steadily increasing for the last 20 years and the most recent nest count is very encouraging.

Kemp's ridleys nest primarily on Rancho Nuevo beach in Mexico. The number of nests has been counted since the 1970s. Starting in the 1980s, the Mexican government, the U.S. shrimping industry, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other organizations have provided resources to protect the beach from poachers and predators.

In 1978, only 924 nests were counted and the number declined to 702 in 1985. With protections in place and shrimpers in the U.S. and Mexico using turtle excluder devices, the number of nests counted each year began to increase. By 1991, there were over 1,000 nests, by 1996, over 2,000 nests, and by 2003, over 8,000 nests. The latest count in 2005 revealed 10,990 nests; an incredible 15-fold increase since 1985.

Scientists are also able to estimate the number of hatchling turtles that emerge from the nests. In 2003, the number of hatchlings was estimated at 476,000 and increased to 630,000 in 2005 which is 20 times the number of hatchlings estimated in 1983.

While Kemp's ridley's nest primarily at Ranch Nueavo, some nest in other areas such as Texas. Fifty-one nests were found along the Texas coast in 2005 compared to the previous record of 42 in 2004.

The number of nests is not a direct count of the total Kemp's ridley population but serves as a very good indicator of how the population is doing. The actual number of turtles would be much higher than the number of nests. Consider that only females nest, that females don't nest until they are seven to 15 years old, and most females only nest every other year. Subtract from that the fact that a single female may nest two to three times in one year and you still have a lot of turtles relative to just 20 years ago.