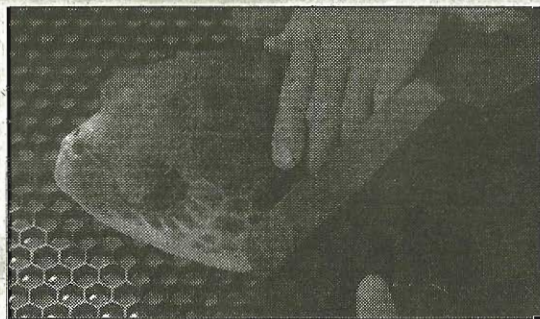


Susan Ellis

On Tuesday, staff from The Nature Conservancy and the National Park Service released back into her natural environment a ridley turtle that was rescued from a tangle of fishing line and pieces of wood.

# Return *to the* Sea



Turtle back in water after being rescued from trap of fishing line and wood pallet

ST. CROIX — Through the collaboration and hard work of several government agencies and volunteers, "Olive," the olive ridley sea turtle rescued last week, was returned to the sea Tuesday in good health.

The sea turtle was rescued from a trap of tangled fishing line, weighted down by part of a wooden pallet, by divers from Dive Experience, and what happened over the next several days made it possible for the turtle to survive and be returned to her natural habitat.

When the sea turtle was rescued by St. Croix divers Don Black and Michelle Pugh from Dive Experience, they discovered she could not submerge to hunt for food or escape from predators due to excessive air trapped in her body. After docking in Christiansted, the turtle was turned over to Ian Lundgren from the National Park Service and his staff, who took her to turtle expert Dr. Michelle Mehalick of Island Animal Clinic for a medical examination. Mehalick said the turtle was in good condition with only a few scrapes and "the most beautiful turtle I've ever seen."

After Mehalick diagnosed the buoyancy problem, the wheels were put in motion to send the turtle to Coral World on St. Thomas for rehabilitation. Until transportation could be

arranged, the turtle was cared for by Richard Gideon and Kemit Amon-Lewis of The Nature Conservancy and Clayton Pollack, Jamie Kilgo and Kirsten Moy of the NPS. Lewis and Gideon adjusted a shallow tank for the turtle and they all spent hours hauling hundreds of gallons of seawater to Olive's temporary accommodations. She floated there for several days and on Sunday night was discovered resting on the bottom of the tank.

Gideon watched her closely Monday and Tuesday and after being reassured she had regained the ability to dive, the coalition became active once again to make arrangements to release Olive where she was found.

Gideon, Pollack, Lewis and others met Mehalick, Black and Pugh on the dock where the turtle gently was carried into the dive boat. During the short ride to Long Reef, the ridley was covered with a tarp to keep her calm and her skin and shell wet. Several times during the trip, Olive crawled forward toward the edge of the boat as if drawn by the smell of the sea.

Once the boat stopped and Lewis and Black were overboard, the tarp was removed and Olive started crawling forward. She was gently lifted over the side and she immediately dove and submerged. Lewis said she went straight to the bottom, a depth of

about 40 feet, and swam up to a hawksbill turtle, resting on the bottom. Then she turned and swam on the bottom, out of view.

Olive's story is similar to other stories of sea turtles found injured or trapped in the waters around the Virgin Islands, thanks to Sea Turtle Assistance and Rescue. STAR is a collaboration of non-government organizations, federal and local agencies, veterinarians and community volunteers. The members include NPS, TNC, the VI and federal departments of fish and wildlife, Geographic Consulting, the West Indies Marine Animal Research and Conservation Service, Coral World and others as needed, Lundgren said.

All sea turtles are designated as either threatened or endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973. Violation can result in up to one year in prison, a \$100,000 fine and confiscation of any equipment used during the criminal act.

To avoid disturbing turtle nests, STAR cautions residents to keep dogs under control on the beach and to be careful when putting up beach umbrellas. Boaters should drive slowly enough so turtles can dive and avoid anchoring boats in sea grass beds and coral reefs.

The hotline to report stranded, sick, injured or dead sea turtles, whales or dolphins is 690-0474.