

Shocked by the biting cold, dying turtles get new life

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Shocked by the biting cold, dying turtles get new life A batch of sea turtles, rescued from chilly waters up north, were released into the balmy Intracoastal off Dania Beach.

It was a mad dash to save one of the slowest of sea creatures, but by Tuesday afternoon a bale of endangered sea turtles were on their way to warmer waters -- and a shot of survival.

Stunned by the cold and facing possible death, the reptiles were collected by state workers in Central Florida and transported via a Disney truck to South Florida.

Students from Nova Southeastern University and workers from Florida's Department of Environment Protection released the turtles back into the Intracoastal off John U. Lloyd State Park in Dania Beach, where the water was at least 10 degrees warmer than where they had been.

"In my 35 years here this is the first time I've seen something of this magnitude," said Carmelo J. Duesler, a park service specialist with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, who supervised Tuesday's rescue effort.

One by one, 17 green sea turtles and a nearly 300-pound loggerhead were unloaded from the truck and lugged to the water by graduate students from NSU, which runs the Broward County Sea Turtle Conservation Program.

So hefty were most of the sea turtles, students often had to partner up to carry the nearly 100 to 150 pound cold-blooded critters.

While some turtles simply waddled their way from the shore line into the water, others needed an extra nudge and were taken into the water by volunteers or park rangers like Mary DiaGiacomo, who braved the chilly waters to carry the turtles directly into the sea.

"I don't mind this job one bit when I get to do this," DiaGiacomo said with the water splashing up to her knees. "This is fun."

With more than 20 volunteers on hand, all it took was 17 minutes to unload the turtles from the big rig to the big blue sea.

And that's just the first batch -- more turtles from the Panhandle and North Florida are expected Wednesday.

The move to warmer waters is necessary because cold blooded reptiles rely on external temperatures to determine their body temperature. When the thermostat dips, the turtles -- like all cold-blooded creatures -- do not have the ability to warm themselves up.

Many of the turtles released Tuesday had been scooped up from the Indian River Lagoon in Brevard County, where the water was a less-than-balmy 58 degrees.

Ensuring the sea turtles survival is especially important for state officials because of their endangered species status.

Just last weekend more than 160 cold-stunned turtles were found floating in Mosquito Lagoon, near Titusville.

Throughout the state, other rescue attempts have been launched by The Turtle Hospital in the Florida Keys, the University of Florida in Gainesville and Sea World in Orlando. Duesler said that while turtle populations are being shifted around, eventually as water temperatures warm up, more turtles will find their way back to areas along Florida's Central Coast and the Panhandle.

And, as far as enjoying the best Florida has to offer, the turtles might have it better than us.

“It's warmer in the water than it is out here,” Duesler said.