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Stockpiling Sea Turtle Carcasses

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The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Southeast Fisheries Center (SEFC), Galveston Laboratory and its collaborators in Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network (STSSN) are collecting and necropsying hundreds of carcasses of sea turtles of a variety of species found stranded on beaches bordering the northwest Gulf of Mexico. Current protocols call for incineration or burial of the remains, but this seem a shameful waste of potentially valuable materials that could be stockpiled and curated for future scientific and educational uses.

Stockpiling of sea turtle carcasses requires a remote site (due to the stench of rotting carcasses), adequate security (e.g., chain link fence enclosure with appropriate signs and warnings), proper labeling and bagging of the carcasses to keep the skeletons intact, and containers with covers to protect the carcasses from rodents and weather. Frozen storage is feasible but more costly and limited in capacity than enclosures.

Museums, universities, taxonomists, etc. are hereby alerted regarding availability of sea turtle carcasses. Those interested in receiving specimens and arranging for their transfer should contact: Marcel J. Duronslet, National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Fisheries Center, Galveston Laboratory, 4700 Avenue U, Galveston, TX 77551-5997 USA; telephone (409) 766-3516. Permitting authorities must be notified by potential recipients prior to transfers of specimens, to assure that proper procedures are followed. International transfer will require a CITES permit.

Among the groups we have contacted so far are the Smithsonian Institution, the University of Texas at Arlington, and Texas A&M University, and we have transferred limited numbers of specimens to each. However, interest in such specimens may be more widespread, but here-to-fore the availability of specimens has not been widely known.

The purpose of this notice is to alert those potentially interested in the specimens. Cost of packing, shipping, etc. must be borne by the recipient. Recipients also must arrange for all necessary permits.

The following are some potential uses for sea turtle carcasses:

1. display of curated and articulated skeletons or bones;
2. studies of pollutant accumulation (e.g., heavy metals) in bones;
3. age-growth studies;
4. taxonomic studies;
5. pathological studies of injuries or mutilation of turtles as shown by skull and bones.