



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*)

FAMILY: Cheloniidae

STATUS: Endangered throughout its range (*Federal Register*, December 2, 1970).

DESCRIPTION: The Kemp's ridley turtle is one of the smallest of the sea turtles, with adults reaching about 2 feet in length and weighing up to 100 pounds. The adult Kemp's ridley has an oval carapace that is almost as wide as it is long and is usually olive-gray in color. The carapace has five pairs of costal scutes. In each bridge adjoining the plastron to the carapace, there are four inframarginal scutes, each of which is perforated by a pore. The head has two pairs of prefrontal scales. Hatchlings are black on both sides. The Kemp's ridley has a triangular-shaped head with a somewhat hooked beak with large crushing surfaces. This turtle is a shallow water benthic feeder with a diet consisting primarily of crabs.

REPRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT: Nesting occurs from April to June during which time the turtles appear off the Tamaulipas and Veracruz coasts of Mexico. Precipitated by strong winds, the females swarm to mass nesting emergences, known as *arribadas* or *arribazones*, to nest during daylight hours. Clutch size averages 110 eggs. Some females breed annually and nest an average of 1 to 4 times in a season at intervals of 10 to 28 days. Age at sexual maturity is believed to be between 7 to 15 years.

RANGE AND POPULATION LEVEL: The range of the Kemp's ridley includes the Gulf coasts of Mexico and the U.S., and the Atlantic coast of North America as far north as Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. Most Kemp's ridleys nest on the coastal beaches of the Mexican states of Tamaulipas and Veracruz, although a very small number of Kemp's ridleys nest consistently at Padre Island National Seashore, Texas. Hatchlings, after leaving the nesting beach, are believed to become entrained in eddies within the Gulf of Mexico, where they are dispersed within the Gulf and Atlantic by oceanic surface currents until they reach about 20 cm in length, at which size they enter coastal shallow water habitats.

The Kemp's ridley is the most seriously endangered of the sea turtles. Its numbers have precipitously declined since 1947, when over 40,000 nesting females were estimated in a single *arribada*. The nesting population produced a low of 702 nests in 1985; however, since the mid-1980's, the number of nests laid in a season has been increasing primarily due to nest protection efforts and implementation of regulations requiring the use of turtle excluder devices in commercial fishing trawls. During the 1999 and 2000 nesting seasons, more than 3,600 nests and 6,000 nests, respectively, were deposited on the Mexico nesting beaches.

HABITAT: Outside of nesting, the major habitat for Kemp's ridleys is the nearshore and inshore waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico, especially Louisiana waters. Kemp's ridleys are often found in salt marsh habitats. The preferred sections of nesting beach are backed up by extensive swamps or large bodies of open water having seasonal narrow ocean connections.

CRITICAL HABITAT: None designated.

REASONS FOR CURRENT STATUS: The decline of this species is primarily due to human activities, including the direct harvest of adults and eggs and incidental capture in commercial fishing operations. Today, under strict protection, the population appears to be in the early stages of recovery.

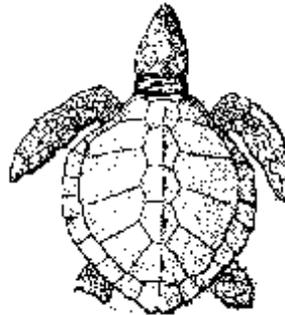
MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION: The recent nesting increase can be attributed to full protection of nesting females and their nests in Mexico, and the requirement to use turtle excluder devices in shrimp trawls both in the United States and Mexico. In 1966, conservation efforts for the Kemp's ridley were initiated on the beach near Rancho Nuevo

in Tamaulipas, Mexico. This locale is the only place in the world where large nesting aggregations of this sea turtle were and are known to occur. From 1966 to 1987, conservation efforts focused on the area of Rancho Nuevo with one turtle protection camp. In 1978, the U.S. joined with Mexico at Rancho Nuevo in a bi-national effort to prevent the extinction of the Kemp's ridley. In 1988, this bi-national program expanded to the south and another camp was added. In 1989, a third camp was established when the program was expanded to the north of Rancho Nuevo. By 1997, a total of seven camps had been established along the Tamaulipas and Veracruz coasts to allow for increased nest protection efforts.

The Mexico government also prohibits harvesting and is working to increase the population through more intensive law enforcement, by fencing nest areas to diminish natural predation, and by relocating all nests into corrals to prevent poaching and predation. While relocation of nests into corrals is currently a necessary management measure, this relocation and concentration of eggs into a "safe" area is of concern since it makes the eggs more susceptible to reduced viability due to movement-induced mortality, disease vectors, catastrophic events like hurricanes, and marine predators once the predators learn where to concentrate their efforts.

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