

FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

The Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle



Photo: NPS

A SEA TURTLE ON THE DECLINE

The Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*) lives in the Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic Coast, from Florida to New England. It is designated as endangered throughout its range under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. This species has suffered catastrophic declines. In a single day in 1947, 42,000 Kemp's Ridleys nested. Its numbers dwindled to just 200 nests annually, from 1978-1991. Thanks to legal protections and prohibitions on turtle egg collection, the Kemp's Ridley has rebounded, with over 12,000 nests recorded in 2006. But the Kemp's Ridley continues to face threats on the land and in the sea.

AN OCEAN OF THREATS

The Kemp's Ridley faces threats from gill nets, longlines, shrimp trawls, and other fishing gear and activities, which can entangle and drown them. Turtles can also ingest or become entwined in marine garbage and debris, including plastic bags, tar balls, and balloons. Other threats in the ocean include toxic chemicals and boat or vessel strikes. Threats on the land include beach armoring, non-native vegetation, and artificial lighting. Lighting may deter females from nesting and disorient hatchlings away from their crucial trek to the water.

KNOW YOUR SEA TURTLE

- **Small but Big:** while the Kemp's Ridley is the smallest marine turtle, adults still weigh about 100 pounds, with a shell that is 24-28 inches long.
- **All Together, Now:** Kemp's Ridleys nest in an event called an "arribada" (Spanish for "arrival"), where successive waves of females come ashore to nest. Scientists have not yet pinned down the cue for large groups of females to gather in the ocean and commence an arribada.
- **Heat & Sex:** incubation temperatures above 31°C produce all females, whereas temperatures below 28°C produce all males. For an even split, sand temperatures should be at 30.2°C.

CLIMATE CHAOS

Climate change affects the Kemp's Ridley in several ways: rising temperatures and other factors related to climate change will likely alter its prey distribution and abundance; sea-level rise may inundate its nesting habitat; and rising sand temperatures can skew sex ratios and therefore affect turtle reproduction.

