

# Greater Atlantic Region Sea Turtle Disentanglement Network (STDN) Sea Turtle Disentanglement Guidelines

## Initial Observation and Report

- 1) When the initial observer reports an entangled sea turtle, collect the following information:
  - a. Observer name and phone number\*
  - b. Name of observing vessel
  - c. Type of vessel, e.g., fishing, private, ferry, etc.
  - d. Observing vessel cell phone number and/or radio call channel
  - e. Date and time of initial observation
  - f. Date and time of report, if different
  - g. Location, including latitude / longitude and locality details
  - h. Description of turtle for species identification
  - i. Condition of turtle- alive or dead
  - j. Description of entangling gear (rope, line, buoys, colors)
  - k. Entangling gear configuration on turtle (head, flippers, single wrap, multiple wraps)
  - l. Description of any visible injuries
  - m. Weather/sea conditions at the scene

*\* NOTE: if the initial observer is not the reporting party (i.e., the observer relayed information through the reporting party), please collect name and contact information for the reporting party, as well.*

- 2) Ask the reporting party the following questions:
  - a. Are you still on scene with the turtle? If not, when was it last seen?
  - b. How long can you stand by?
  - c. Can you stand by until an authorized disentanglement responder arrives? Provide caller with an estimate for how long it will take for a responder to arrive on scene.
  - d. Are there other vessels nearby that could help stand by if needed?
  - e. Does the turtle appear to be anchored or making way? If making way, can you estimate its swimming speed and direction?
  - f. Can you take photographs or video of the turtle and the gear?

*NOTE: NOAA Fisheries Service (NMFS) conducted ESA Section 7 consultations and issued biological opinions for the following fisheries: American lobster; monkfish; Northeast multispecies; spiny dogfish; Northeast skate complex; mackerel/squid/butterfish; summer flounder/scup/black sea bass; Atlantic bluefish, and Atlantic sea scallop. The opinions authorized these Federally-permitted fishermen to free sea turtles from entangling gear. Fishermen must still comply with all applicable regulations, including the sea turtle handling and resuscitation requirements. No other Federally-permitted fishermen are authorized to disentangle sea turtles. It is the recommendation of NMFS that a trained and authorized member of the STDN respond to entangled sea turtles. However, if a STDN member is unable to respond in a timely manner, the authorized fishermen listed above may respond. Every sea turtle entanglement event must be reported to NMFS and must receive a Sea Turtle Entanglement Report Form.*

## **Reporting to NMFS, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO)**

Please report entanglement events to the GARFO stranding and entanglement hotline at **866-755-6622** or to the U.S. Coast Guard on **VHF Channel 16**. GARFO must be notified prior to on-water disentanglement response.

## Response

- 1) Approach
  - a. Avoid any moving or unusually clumped buoys and lines near the turtle.
  - b. Approach turtle slowly and carefully until the vessel is alongside, then stop the vessel, putting the engine in neutral.

c. Record the latitude / longitude and time when you arrive at the turtle's location.

2) Assessment

Note the following information in order to devise an appropriate plan of action for close approach and disentanglement.

- a. Is the turtle moving, attempting to swim away from the vessel, or diving?
- b. Does the turtle appear to be anchored or dragging the gear?
- c. How often does the turtle surface?
- d. How is the turtle entangled: flippers (front right, front left, etc.), head, or shell?
- e. Are there single or multiple wraps of line on the turtle?
- f. Are the wraps restricting the turtle's movement?
- g. Are there any wounds associated with the entanglement? How serious are these injuries?

3) Disentanglement

- a. The goal is to release the turtle free of *all* gear.
- b. **Do not get into the water with the turtle. Work from the vessel with the turtle in the water.**
- c. Leave the engine in neutral throughout disentanglement efforts.
- d. Determine which line is under strain from anchoring or heavy gear.
- e. Grapple the anchoring line and maintain a firm hold or cleat the line to the vessel in order to keep the turtle in close proximity without lifting it above the water. To avoid losing the turtle before completely being disentangled, do not release or cut this line before trying to remove *all* other gear.
- f. Try to unravel the gear from the turtle without cutting. Be careful around powerful flippers, jaws, and claws.
- g. If the gear cannot be removed by unraveling and the turtle is at risk of strangulation, drowning, or further injury, try to cut the line.
- h. Avoid cutting the turtle by pulling line away from the turtle with a boat hook before cutting.
- i. If active gear must be cut to free a turtle, attempt to reattach the cut ends so as to leave the gear intact on site. If this is not possible, collect all of the gear. Do not leave partial gear or bottom gear without a surface buoy. Avoid creating derelict gear. Save all cut / removed gear for analysis (see Documentation).
- j. If you cannot free the turtle of *all* gear, report the last known location, including latitude / longitude and locality details, wind and current speed and direction, and any identifying characteristics about the turtle or gear. Report this information to the GARFO stranding and disentanglement hotline at **866-755-6622** or to the U.S. Coast Guard on **VHF Channel 16**.

4) Release

- a. Leave engine in neutral and release the turtle from the last line (the anchoring line).
- b. Record the latitude / longitude and time of release.
- c. Ensure that the turtle is safely away from the vessel before putting the engine in gear.
- d. Observe the turtle's behavior after release. Did it dive and/or swim away or did it remain relatively immobile at the surface?

5) Documentation

- a. The Sea Turtle Entanglement Report Form (STERF) must be filled out for every reported entanglement event. Every effort should be made to *immediately* submit the STERF to NMFS. Although earlier is preferred, the STERF should be submitted no later than 30 days following the event.
- b. Gear Collection
  - o Unless otherwise authorized, gear should only be collected if it is not actively fishing (i.e., only collect derelict, incomplete or displaced gear).
  - o Do not create derelict gear by collecting surface buoys, thereby leaving bottom gear unmarked.
  - o Gear collected from endangered or threatened sea turtles requires a Chain of Custody form.
  - o Every effort should be made to send gear *immediately* with the chain-of-custody form to the NMFS Gear Team. Although earlier is preferred, gear should be sent no later than 30 days following the entanglement event.

- o If gear is not collected, please document all identifiable features (e.g., buoy colors, line colors, traps / pots, ID numbers) with photos.
- c. Photo or Video Documentation
  - o Photos and/or video should be sent to NMFS, ideally at the same time as submission of the STERF.
  - o The following list indicates the photos that should be taken during each entanglement event
    - The sea turtle in the entangling gear, showing overall gear configuration and confirming species;
    - Close-ups of the entanglement site(s), showing any injuries and detailed gear configuration; and
    - Any identifiable features of the gear, e.g., buoy color, tags and/or numbers.

**NMFS Contact Information:**

**Electronic submission of photos, video and STERFs (\*\*preferred means of submission\*\*):**

[Kate.Sampson@noaa.gov](mailto:Kate.Sampson@noaa.gov)

**Mailing address for submission of gear with chain of custody forms:**

John Kenney  
Re: Sea Turtles  
30 Macintosh Lane  
Saunderstown, RI 02874

**Non-electronic submission of photos, video, and/or STERFs:**

Kate Sampson, Sea Turtle Disentanglement Coordinator  
NOAA Fisheries Service, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office  
55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930  
Fax: 978-281-9394

**Please address any questions to:**

Ph: 978-282-8470, [Kate.Sampson@noaa.gov](mailto:Kate.Sampson@noaa.gov)

The collection of information on sea turtle entanglement is necessary to ensure sea turtles are being conserved and protected, as mandated by the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. Your voluntary collection and submission of this information will help achieve this objective. The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average one hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Notwithstanding any other provision of the law, no person is required to respond to, nor shall any person be subject to a penalty for failure to comply with, a collection of information subject to the requirements of the Paperwork Reduction Act, unless that collection of information displays a currently valid OMB Control Number. Personal identifiers and any commercial information will be kept confidential to the extent permitted under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (5 U.S.C. 552), the Department of Commerce FOIA regulations (15 CFR Part 4, Subpart A), the Trade Secrets Act (18 U.S.C. 1905), and NOAA Administrative Order 216-100. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to (NMFS, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office Protected Resources Division, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930).