

Keeping Sumter Beautiful
The rescue of Gary the sea turtle (part 2)
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Two weeks ago, I wrote about my experience rescuing a Loggerhead sea turtle from the mud of a salt marsh in Pawley's Island. Although we ended the experience covered in mud and with a few broken or missing shoes, my friends and I had the easy job. The really difficult part of Gary's recover came later, at the Sea Turtle Care Center at the South Carolina Aquarium.

When he arrived at the care center, Gary was lethargic and showed all the signs of Debilitated Turtle Syndrome (DTS). Various health issues may result in a turtle developing DTS. Poor water quality, litter, and discarded fishing gear are common initial causes and escalating factors in the illness. Gary had barnacles and other epibiota on his skin and shell and was emaciated, lethargic, and dehydrated. He also had a fishing hook embedded in the bottom of his shell.

Staff at the care center began treating Gary right away. He received treatments for low blood sugar and cardiovascular concerns and antibiotics to prevent secondary infections. Over the course of the next year, Gary's health improved and he steadily gained weight thanks to the efforts of the dedicated staff at the aquarium. Gary wasn't always an easy patient. He would knock down the spray bar on his tank multiple times a day and splash staff as they walked by. He also proved to be a picky eater, preferring salmon. I can't say I blame him. I like salmon too. Finally, after a year and two months of careful treatment and hard work, Gary was cleared for release! He was released back to his ocean home on July 19th at Folly Beach County Park.

What does all of this have to do with folks in Sumter? Our actions here impact the water quality and wildlife in Sumter, all along the river downstream of us, and even into the ocean. Our actions can lead to low dissolved oxygen and fish kills, meaning less food for sea turtles and other predators. Litter in the water is often mistaken for food by sea turtles and causes digestive issues. Littered plastic and fishing gear is often found entangling or in the stomachs of turtles taken to the Sea Turtle Care Center. Remember that your actions on land and in the water impact the health of your neighbors and wildlife at home and down stream.

To see photos of Gary's rescue and release and to learn more about water quality, visit www.facebook.com/sumterstormwatersolutions. Loggerhead sea turtles are a protected species. Please do not approach or try to handle one if you are not properly trained. If you ever see a sick, injured, or dead sea turtle; call the 24-hour DNR Hotline at 1-800-922-5431.

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