

Coral World Provides Lifesaving Equipment for Rescued Turtle

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Divers on Dec. 6 found a juvenile green sea turtle struggling with fishing line wrapped around her shell and flippers in the waters by Christiansted. V.I. and U.S. Fish & Wildlife representatives responded to the call. They brought the turtle, nicknamed Josephine, to Dr. Michelle Mehalick at the St Croix Animal Welfare Center for medical assistance.

That's according to a release issued by Coral World Wednesday. During the weekend, some fishing line and a hook that was embedded in her left shoulder were removed.

"We noticed a line in her mouth and down her throat. Radiographs did not reveal any internal hooks, but we could not pull the line out because it was too far down the turtle's digestive tract. We needed to visualize what was going on in the turtle's digestive tract," said Dr. Mehalick.

A V.I. Fish and Wildlife representative and Dr. Mehalick contacted Coral World about using their endoscope to provide an image of the fishing line and possibly remove it. According to Erica Palmer, Coral World's Veterinary Technician, "Endoscopy is a nonsurgical procedure used to examine the digestive tract. Using an endoscope, a flexible tube with a light and camera attached to it, the vet can view pictures of the digestive tract on a TV monitor." Coral World paid for Palmer's flight to St. Croix, with endoscope and accessories in hand, on Monday morning December 9.

Palmer noted, "The endoscope is a \$50,000 piece of equipment Coral World purchased for the dolphins' preventive healthcare monitoring program." According to General Curator Lee Kellar, "Coral World has invested in cutting edge medical equipment to support the welfare of its dolphins and other park animals. We welcome the opportunity to share such lifesaving equipment for animal rescues and rehabilitation in the U.S. Virgin Islands."

Using the endoscope, Dr. Mehalick investigated the turtle's esophagus and stomach but did not find any balled-up string. She noted, "I cut as much of the line as possible in hopes that the turtle will naturally pass the remaining line pieces." Josephine will remain under observation at the St Croix Animal Welfare Center and will be fed regularly to encourage digestion and bowel movement.

STAR is a non-profit organization whose mission is "To promote sea turtle-friendly practices and a conservation ethic on land and at sea in the US Virgin Islands, and respond to incidents of injured, disoriented or imperiled sea turtles through rescue and rehabilitation". This collaboration of NGO's, territorial and federal agencies, veterinarians, and community volunteers have joined together to provide education and assistance for stranded sea turtles in the territory. Palmer emphasized, "STAR relies on many community volunteers, local veterinarians, and other donated resources like those offered by Coral World, but the most important participant in STAR is you! Please report any entrapped, disoriented, sick, injured, or dead sea turtle by calling the rescue hotline at (340) 690-0474. You can find out more about STAR at STAR-Sea Turtle Assistance and Rescue."

All sea turtles are designated as either threatened or endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973. Violations can result in up to one year in prison, up to a \$100,000 fine, and the confiscation of any equipment used during the criminal act.

Coral World said it's the only approved Sea Turtle Rehabilitation Facility in the Virgin Islands and has been conducting and funding turtle rehabilitation since it reopened in 1997 as part of its mission to educate and inspire appreciation for the Caribbean marine environment as well as entertain.