

Introduction to the Special Issue on the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*)

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The Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*) is an iconic Gulf of Mexico species and an enduring symbol of restoration and recovery. Its population declined dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s after decades of egg harvest and incidental capture in fisheries. By the mid-1980s only a few hundred female Kemp's ridleys came ashore to lay eggs on their nesting beaches in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Conservation practices implemented to reduce mortality and increase recruitment saved the species from extinction and led to exponential growth in the number of adult female Kemp's ridleys from the few hundred turtles counted in 1985 to nearly 10,000 turtles by 2009. This outcome is one of the greatest wildlife conservation successes of our time.

One valuable lesson learned is that sea turtle restoration is slow, but possible, if threats are reduced or removed, and recruitment into the population is sustained at high levels. Key to the success of the initial Kemp's ridley recovery were the intensive conservation actions and cooperation of two nations; federal, state, and local resource agencies; nongovernmental organizations; industry; hundreds of volunteers; and the funding made available for recovery.

There are many key events that contributed to saving the Kemp's ridley from extinction (Heppell et al., 2007). Most notable, however, is the combination of long-term protection of nesting beaches, requiring the use of turtle excluder devices on shrimp fishing vessels in U.S. and Mexican waters, seasonal and spatial closures to shrimp fishing in critical habitat, and the reduction in shrimp fishing effort in the Gulf of Mexico. Collectively, these actions led to an

increase in the number of Kemp's ridley nests in Mexico and Texas, an expansion of their nesting range in the Gulf of Mexico, and the impressive population growth observed through 2009 (Heppell et al., 2007; Crowder and Heppell, 2011).

Unfortunately, the recovery of the Kemp's ridley slowed substantially after 2009 and correlated spatially and temporally with multiple natural and anthropogenic stressors in the Gulf of Mexico. In response to concerns about the species and its status, Texas Sea Grant and the Gladys Porter Zoo cohosted the Second International Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Symposium in November 2014 to provide a timely forum for the presentation and discussion of recent advances in the science, conservation, and management of this endangered species. The papers in this special issue were presented at the symposium and greatly advance our knowledge of the biology of the species, the history of conservation efforts that saved it from extinction, and the impacts of recent stressors in the Gulf of Mexico.

LITERATURE CITED

- CROWDER, L., AND S. HEPELL. 2011. The decline and rise of a sea turtle: how Kemp's ridleys are recovering in the Gulf of Mexico. *Solutions* 2:67-73.
- HEPELL, S. S., P. M. BURCHFIELD, AND J. PEÑA. 2007. p. 325-335. *In: Biology and conservation of Ridley sea turtles*. P. T. Plotkin (ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

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