

Herbie - an Amazing Ocean Ambassador

Not so long ago there lived a loggerhead turtle in the sea off the coast of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. She spent her days foraging for molluscs on the inshore reefs and floating lazily in the sun-kissed, warm water. At night she slept on the reef floor, or floating on the surface if the sea was calm. One day, she was woken at sunrise by fingers of light flickering through the water and swam to the surface to get a breath.

The air was fresh, cleaned by a recent rainstorm during the night, but as she rose to the surface she realized she was lost, she must have been swept away from her home reef during the storm. The turtle lifted her head above the water to get her bearings but could not see land.

She panicked!

Her instincts told her to swim westwards towards the shore. She swam and swam, the reef was near, she knew it was. In her panic she did not take note of where she was going.... she was not going anywhere! She was swimming but something was holding her back. What was this thing? She was trapped! The turtle swam for another 20 minutes and finally gave up! Luckily she had been swimming near the surface of the sea so even though she was trapped she could get her head out of the water to breathe.

What seemed like hours later, she heard a frightening noise. It was loud and getting louder, but she was too weak to respond to her fight or flight instincts. She just floated, lifeless in the water caught in this 'thing'.

"Bongani", shouted Sipho, "There's something caught in this net. Quick, lets get it onto the boat!" "Yes Sipho, I see it, bring the boat round. Cut the motor! Got it!"

Bongani and Sipho had been fishing behind the breakers when they noticed something caught in a shark net. Bongani grabbed the net and lifted it out of the water. There was a turtle entangled in the ropes.

"Its still alive Sipho, lets cut the net and take the turtle back to shore".

Sipho and Bongani, raced back to Umhlanga in their little boat. Someone at the ski-boat club would know whom to phone.

They immediately phoned the Durban Aquarium and Simon, the curator came to collect the turtle.

“Shame, the turtle is exhausted, but very lucky to have been found”, Simon said.

“Thanks Bongani and Sipho, you got to her just in time, I’ll let you know how she does”.

“It’s a young, adult, female, loggerhead turtle”, Simon told his aquarium staff. *“Her shell is quite rounded, like the bonnet of a VW Beetle. Lets call her “Herbie”!* Herbie adapted to her foster home quickly, she gained weight and recovered from her ordeal.

Some years later Herbie moved with the aquarium to her new home at uShaka Sea World, her carers catering to her every need. Over time she was taught to go to the same spot every day to get food, medicine and to be checked for any parasites or diseases.

When Herbie was rescued from the net, she was 8 years old. She has been the star attraction at the aquarium for 16 years. Now she is 25 and her instincts have told her that its time to nest and lay eggs.

But, she was confused. She knows that the beach where she hatched is far away and she hasn’t come across a mate since she was brought to the aquarium! What to do?

Herbie had noticed a beach when her carers come to the water to feed her, maybe that will do. One night when the staff and visitors had all gone home, Herbie swam to the beach and climbed out of the water. She lumbered across the sand, it’s the right texture, but she could not go too far! *“Here will have to do”*, she thinks. Carefully she dug a cavity for her body to lie in, then she dug an egg cavity with her back flippers. When the nest was deep enough Herbie laid 80 soft shelled, round eggs - one at a time they dropped into the hole.

Simon always arrived at work earlier than his staff. For some reason, today he felt he should check on Herbie. On arriving at the sandy beach at the Turtle Lagoon he notices sand thrown all over the place. What a mess! Was there a group of unruly children us-

ing the beach as a sand pit yesterday? How did they get in? He was a little irritated.

No! What's that?

Simon knows what turtle tracks look like as he helped to monitor turtles nesting many years ago.

Excitedly he phones one of his colleagues on the radio:

"Malini! Come in. Can you come to Turtle Lagoon? Out".

Malini was so excited to see that Herbie had laid eggs.

This is good news - she is now a mature loggerhead turtle and its time to think about her release back into the ocean.

Herbie has many friends who come to see her and take photos of their favorite turtle through the aquarium window. Everyone who loves Herbie knows the best thing for her would be to take her back home.

Much has been learnt about how to look after turtles in human care from Herbie.

The aquarium has rehabilitated and released at least 200 turtles over the years. Rehabilitation and release is one of their priorities, especially for endangered animals.

Early one morning, Herbie went to her feeding station as usual, but something was different. She was offered food but she didn't want to eat. Suddenly she was lifted out of the water and placed in a rubber-lined box. She felt cramped, frightened - like when she was caught in the net all those years ago. She could breathe but could not escape. She heard familiar voices, soft, soothing.... it will be OK.

The decision was made to release Herbie in the Maputaland Marine Protected Area. A satellite tracking device was attached to Herbie's shell, to be able to follow where she went and check up on her progress.

The next 6 hours were noisy, bumpy and very unfamiliar for Herbie. Why were they taking her away from her pool, her safe place? But something seemed right. She trusted these beings, they were kind and had become her family. Suddenly the bumping stopped, the box she was in was lifted and put down on the beach. Then the one side of the box was removed and....

She knew where she was, she wanted more than anything to go, go, go... to get into that vast watery wilderness... to go home!

Her instincts kicked in, Herbie lumbered out of the box and onto the beach heading straight for the water... she did not even look back to say goodbye.

EPILOGUE

Herbie's satelight tracking device stopped working on the 12th April 2019, she was released in January. We do not know what happened to her satelight tracking device, but a paddle skier did see her south of her last transmission off Kingsburg Beach.

She is a truly free turtle now, we hope she will one day be seen nesting on our beaches, identified by the tag in her fin.

**The question mark of this story:
How do turtles find their way back home?**

SLIDE WITH A MAP IN THE TURTLE SHELL

Sea turtles nest in a wide, warm belt around the world. They return to nest on the same beaches where they themselves hatched, and each species of sea turtle has a special place in the world where they nest. For some, only one particular place will do. Kemp's Ridley nests only on one beach on the north-east coast of Mexico (A). The flatback lays its eggs only on the coast of northern Australia (B). Some loggerhead turtles migrate over 3 500 km to nest on the northern Zululand beaches of South Africa (C). They migrate as far as the southern tip of Africa or north to Somalia and the Seychelles. It is a wonder that sea turtles seem to remember where they were born and that they can find these places again.