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Endangered sea turtle spotted in Santa Monica Bay

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An endangered Pacific green sea turtle surfaces for air in the Santa Monica Bay, waters where the species was not known to travel.

Whether a sign of El Niño or climate change, rare sighting is due to warmer waters

By Pat Reynolds

I have the good fortune of being friendly with Maddalena Bearzi, a local marine biologist who has been studying marine life here in the Santa Monica Bay for nearly 20 years. Bearzi has written scientific reports and also books about her time spent in local waters researching primarily the local dolphin population. She is president of the Ocean Conservation Society and knows these waters as well or better than anyone around. With that said, when I

got word from her that she ran across a creature that even she had never seen swimming in the bay, I took notice.

Last week, Bearzi and her team were conducting research a couple of miles offshore when they spotted what at first they thought was a fallen party balloon. It turned out to be a solitary Pacific green turtle swimming along off the Los Angeles coast — a rare sight for these parts. In fact, Bearzi said it's the first one she's ever seen in these waters.

“It's interesting. People talk about sea turtles in this area, and I know they are around the San Gabriel River, but mostly turtles are found from San Diego on down to Mexico. The water in Santa Monica Bay is usually too cold for these animals,” she said.

Bearzi, who used to study turtles before she began her marine mammal research in Los Angeles, explains that the green turtle colony in the San Gabriel River area is a bit of a special circumstance because the water there is artificially heated from two industrial electric power plants on both sides of the river that make the water very warm, creating what she called an “artificial habitat.”

So does this lonely little turtle's presence speak to larger issues? Perhaps. Scientists are split about whether we are presently in an El Niño period. The World Meteorological Organization officially states it is not the case, but suggests things are on the borderline:

“While the tropical Pacific Ocean surface temperatures have reached El Niño thresholds, and exceeded them in the far eastern portion of the basin, atmospheric indicators remain neutral, and hence an El Niño is not considered to have started,” according to the group.

There is, however, a current consensus about a somewhat unusual general warming of our local waters.

“We see a lot of weird stuff going on here right now,” Bearzi said. “For instance we have seen by-the-wind-sailor jellyfish [a warm water species], more sunfish, who also like warmer water, subtropical fish and different marine mammal species — this is all associated with warmer water temperatures. Some scientists are saying we'll see more and more of these tropical species coming this way.”

Beyond the possible indication of climatic change, the notion of sea turtles becoming a part of our community is just plain interesting. These peaceful animals live as long as 80 years, are basically vegetarians and will often return to the same beach used by their mothers to lay their eggs.

So, our little friend is a bit of a mystery. According to Bearzi, the scientists who are studying the San Gabriel turtles have tagged that population, but she did not see any tags on this individual. Its presence will no doubt create plenty of interest for the scientific community, who work with academic as well as conservation motives: the green turtle is an endangered species.

“For sea turtles in general, it's quite bad,” Bearzi said. “They're all endangered. There's a huge problem with by-catch, lack of habitat, pollution, poaching — these are just some of the issues. “The bottom line: “It's important

that we know the status of these animals, because if we don't do something they can disappear," she said.

Bearzi will soon head back out into the bay to continue her research for the Ocean Conservation Society and says that she will, of course, keep an eye out for more sea turtles. The presence of the animals is important in respect to the population and sustainability of the species itself, and sightings can also be a powerful telltale for what's happening in our environment.