

Uni-flipper turtle gets it straight with swimsuit

April 11 2009, By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN , Associated Press Writer



Allison, a rescued green sea turtle who has only one flipper, swims with the aid of a fin attached with neoprene at the Sea Turtle, Inc., in South Padre Island, Texas, Wednesday, April 8, 2009. Without the fin, developed at the turtle rescue facility, Allison can only swim in circles. The group had previously experimented with prosthetic flippers without luck. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

(AP) -- Allison, a green sea turtle with only one flipper, has been going around and around and around for most of her life.

But swimming in tight circles is tough for a 5-year-old turtle whose life expectancy is about 150 years.

Allison was set straight Wednesday, when researchers outfitted her in a black neoprene suit with a carbon-fiber dorsal fin on the back that allows

her to glide gracefully with other turtles.

"That's a sea turtle doing what a sea turtle does," said Dave Cromwell, a worker who watched the turtle's new moves at Sea Turtle Inc., a Texas not-for-profit group that rehabilitates injured [sea turtles](#).

The fin on the suit, which resembles a wetsuit covering about three-quarters of her body, acts like a rudder and gives her stability. Allison can change direction by varying the strokes of her front right flipper, the lone survivor in what rescuers believe was a shark attack.

Sea Turtle Inc. curator Jeff George said turtles with only one flipper are usually euthanized because they would struggle to reach the surface for air. Two-flipper turtles can be adopted by zoos and three-flipper turtles can be returned to the wild.

Allison, who arrived at the rescue center in 2005, was given a slim chance of survival, but she recovered from her injuries and wormed her way into the hearts of her rescuers, who tried to find a way to help the circling turtle.

"The whole reason we're doing this is to improve her quality of life," said Tom Wilson, a 21-year-old intern who thought up the suit.

George said a team of scientists last year spent months trying to develop a prosthetic flipper to counter the thrust of Allison's remaining paddle, but there was not enough of a stump remaining to attach prosthetics.

Wilson's idea applied the physics of canoe paddling. The scientists have developed equations that will allow them to tailor new suits and fins because Allison could grow to around 500 to 600 pounds.

Even though Allison will never return to the sea, the groundbreaking

work will make her an "ambassador" for an endangered species, George said.

For now, the triumph that the turtle could swim like the others was enough for those at the rescue center: Cromwell said watchers wept the first time Allison dove to feed at the salad bar of waving Romaine lettuce.

On the Net:

Sea Turtle Inc.: <http://www.seaturtleinc.com/>

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