

# Slow pokes: Acupuncture helps hypothermic turtles

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Two endangered sea turtles that are shells of their former selves after getting stranded on Cape Cod during a cold spell are getting some help easing back into the wild—from an acupuncturist.

Dexter and Fletcher Moon, juvenile Kemp's Ridley sea turtles, remained calm as acupuncturist Claire McManus gently tapped more than a dozen needles into their grayish-green, leathery skin during a [therapy session](#) intended to decrease inflammation and swelling on their front flippers, restore a full range of motion on those limbs and help the animals regain their appetites.

"There aren't a lot of people doing sea turtle acupuncture," said McManus, who works alongside a vet to find parts of the marine mammals' bodies corresponding to locations where acupuncturists put needles to treat front limbs. "There is not a whole lot of literature out there on turtle acupuncture, so I'm basing it on how we treat other animals and humans."

McManus uses particularly [thin needles](#) for sea turtle acupuncture.

"The needles, they are tiny, no bigger, like having a [mosquito bite](#). You notice there's no blood," McManus said. "You can probably fit four or five of these inside the type of a needle you'd use to draw blood, so they didn't really feel it."

Dexter and Fletcher Moon were among a record number of more than

400 turtles of various species that got stranded on Cape Cod and the southern Massachusetts shore over the winter.

The victims included juvenile Kemp's Ridley sea turtles that were there to feast on crabs, fish and jellyfish as [cold weather](#) settled over New England, causing hypothermia to set in and render the cold-blooded animals immobile and unable to eat for days. As their stunned bodies floated on the [sea surface](#), their limbs were exposed to extremely cold winds that ultimately blew them to the beach. Only 242 of the stranded sea turtles lived, and they were taken to the [New England Aquarium's](#) offsite animal care center for treatment.

The turtles arrived because of hypothermia but also had secondary problems, such as pneumonia, and were malnourished.

"They haven't been eating in a couple of weeks, so they don't have the energy that it takes to be able to fight off some of these things," said Connie Merigo, head of the aquarium's marine rescue team.

Vets used laser therapy, antibiotics, enriched meals and other treatments to help turtles recover their health and strength before being returned to the wild.

Still, the sophisticated treatments could not help 14 [sea turtles](#). That includes Dexter and Fletcher Moon, who are unable to use their front flippers—making it impossible for them to forage for food in the wild or escape from sharp-toothed predators prowling off the coast.

"We reach a point, sometimes, in the therapy for these turtles that the traditional methods aren't working the way we want them to, and so we've reached out to a licensed acupuncturist," Merigo said.

One other turtle, a loggerhead, is also getting acupuncture treatment; the

other 11 not yet back in the wild are continuing on traditional treatments for lingering infections and orthopedic ailments.

The acupuncture is intended to reduce stress, increase blood flow and boost the immune system—just as in humans.

Dexter and Fletcher Moon have already had three acupuncture sessions, scheduled once a week, said Merigo, who broke into a broad smile as she described their improvements over the past three weeks.

"These two turtles really had very limited limb use and they weren't eating. We are seeing improved limb use and improved appetite," Merigo said. "They are eating on their own, which is fantastic."

McManus, the acupuncturist, was restrained when describing her reaction to the results.

"It makes me feel very happy," McManus said. "Acupuncture is not alternative to conventional medicine—they are also receiving Western treatments as well, but the fact that it can work in conjunction with the other treatments they are getting makes me very happy."

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