

Released sea turtle carries oceanographer's ashes out to sea

October 1 2017, by Will Weissert



Mourners are reflected as a sea turtle named Picasso carries the ashes of Tony Amos, 80, a renowned oceanographer, on it's back as it is released back into the Gulf of Mexico following a memorial service, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017, in Port Aransas, Texas. Amos died of complications from prostate cancer on Sept. 4, mere days after Harvey roared ashore as a fearsome hurricane. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

A rescued green sea turtle named Picasso was released back into the Gulf of Mexico on Saturday, carrying the ashes of a self-taught Texas oceanographer who founded the rehabilitation center that helped nurse it

back to health.

Hundreds of well-wishers surged forward to get better views during a sunset ceremony that effectively allowed Tony Amos, who devoted his life to helping the endangered reptiles, to do so once more in death. On a stretch of beach named in his honor, Amos' wife, Lynn; his son, Michael; and other relatives sprinkled ashes on the turtle's back, then watched it slowly flap and crawl its way into the waves.

"Come on little turtle, off you go. The sun's about to set," called Lynn Amos, when the creature stopped and briefly raised its head, almost as if to acknowledge the onlookers.

Many in attendance were barefoot. Some choked back tears. When the turtle finally disappeared into the shimmering surf, a few cried, "Bye Tony!"

Amos, 80, died of complications from prostate cancer on Sept. 4, mere days after Harvey roared ashore as a fearsome Category 4 hurricane. It damaged the Animal Rehabilitation Keep for ailing sea [turtles](#) and aquatic birds that Amos opened nearly four decades ago.

But the turtles there weathered the storm well—as their counterparts in the wild also appear to have done, advocates say.



A sea turtle named Picasso carries the ashes of Tony Amos, 80, a renowned oceanographer, on its back as it is released back into the Gulf of Mexico following a memorial service, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017, in Port Aransas, Texas. Amos died of complications from prostate cancer on Sept. 4, mere days after Harvey roared ashore as a fearsome hurricane. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

An early hatching season meant most turtles headed to sea before the storm arrived, with their eggs already hatched rather than lying on the beach to be subsumed. Also, few turtles became stranded inland as Harvey pulled the tide far out and, since the punishing winds and rains subsided, only a relatively small number has washed back onshore or been found among storm debris.

"This certainly could have been worse," said Tim Tristan, [executive director](#) of the Texas Sealife Center, a nonprofit rescue and rehabilitation facility in Corpus Christi, close to where Harvey first made landfall Aug. 25. Five of the world's seven sea turtle species are found in the Gulf of Mexico and have been documented in parts of

Texas: green, hawksbill, Kemp's ridley, leatherback and loggerhead.

At Amos' turtle and aquatic bird center in the Harvey-ravaged beach town of Port Aransas, the hurricane smashed roof tiles and solar panels and collapsed parts of buildings. Partially submerged, concrete tanks housing around 60 rescue turtles were also damaged, but the animals weren't harmed. Even Barnacle Bill, a 200-plus pound loggerhead who first came to the center in 1997, was fine despite the storm mangling the cover of his pool.

Staff arriving by pickup truck had to steer through downed powerlines and assorted destruction to reach the rehabilitation facility just after Harvey passed. They put turtles in the back before returning a second time with plastic tubs.



A sea turtle that had been held at the Animal Rehabilitation Keep in Port Aransas, Texas, swims in a tank at the Sea Life Center, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017, in Corpus Christi, Texas. About 30 sea turtles were transferred after Hurricane

Harvey destroyed the facility in Port Aransas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

Animals well enough were released to sea, but those who weren't went to Tristin's facility, which also sustained roof damage and remains tarped. They will likely remain there for months amid repairs to the Animal Rehabilitation Keep.

Sea turtles generally are good at avoiding hurricanes except for eggs that can be flooded or babies who are displaced from floating mats of seaweed where they feed, said Jeff George, executive director of Sea Turtle, Inc., a rescue and [rehabilitation center](#) on South Padre Island near the Texas-Mexico border. As Harvey approached Texas, George and volunteers scoured the beach and collected about 280 eggs that waited out the storm indoors, inside insulated containers. All but a few hatched and were released about a week later.

Since then, only a few recent hatchlings have had to be rescued after washing up on South Padre area beaches, and George said many of those came from the Caribbean, far from their nesting areas near Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Normally the turtle hatching season runs from May through late August, but a mild winter kept the Gulf waters warmer and ensured hatchings began extra early this year—meaning many turtles were born and swam away pre-Harvey.

"You wonder if that was luck or if Mother Nature has things balanced," George said.



In this Jan. 11, 2010, file photo, Candice Mottet, left, and Tony Amos, director of the Animal Rehabilitation Keep in Port Aransas, Texas, hold the smallest and biggest green sea turtles that came ashore because of cold temperatures. (AP Photo/Corpus Christi Caller-Times, George Gongora, File)

In Port Aransas, a few turtles were discovered amid Harvey's wreckage, but most marine experts say it could have been worse.

Amos was born in London and went to Bermuda at 17, trying unsuccessfully to engineer a color, flat-screen television. Having never graduated from college, he moved to Port Aransas in 1976 and became an oceanographer for the University of Texas Marine Science Institute.

Three years later, the Ixtoc I exploratory well exploded in the Gulf about 50 miles from Mexico's coast, and Amos saw the devastating effects of the resulting oil spill on sea life. He later founded the Animal Rehabilitation Keep, which still helps hundreds of turtles and birds annually—tackling everything from pelicans that swallow plastic to turtles stricken with a tumor-causing virus.

Known for a long, white beard that helped him play Santa Claus at Christmas, Amos collected and analyzed debris on Texas beaches and painstakingly entered findings in databases. He also sailed on marine voyages throughout the world.



A sea turtle that had been held at the Animal Rehabilitation Keep in Port Aransas, Texas, swims in a tank at the Sea Life Center, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017, in Corpus Christi, Texas. About 30 sea turtles, many awaiting surgery for tumors, were transferred after Hurricane Harvey destroyed the facility in Port Aransas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

At the conclusion of Saturday's ceremony, some attendees tossed flowers into the surf behind the turtle—but then went to retrieve them, wary that Amos would have objected to littering in the Gulf.



Sea turtles that had been held at the Animal Rehabilitation Keep in Port Aransas, Texas, are held at the Sea Life Center, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017, in Corpus Christi, Texas. About 30 sea turtles were transferred after Hurricane Harvey destroyed the facility in Port Aransas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



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Michael Amos releases a sea turtle with the ashes of his father, Tony Amos, 80, a renowned oceanographer, into the Gulf of Mexico following a memorial service, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017, in Port Aransas, Texas. Amos died of

complications from prostate cancer on Sept. 4, mere days after Harvey roared ashore as a fearsome hurricane. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



Flowers are tossed in to ocean after a sea turtle with along with the ashes of renowned oceanographer Tony Amos were released into the Gulf of Mexico following a memorial service, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017, in Port Aransas, Texas. Amos, 80, died of complications from prostate cancer on Sept. 4, mere days after Harvey roared ashore as a fearsome hurricane. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



The ashes of Tony Amos, 80, a renowned oceanographer, are sprinkled on the back of a sea turtle before it was released in the Gulf of Mexico following a memorial service, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017, in Port Aransas, Texas. Amos, 80, died of complications from prostate cancer on Sept. 4, mere days after Harvey roared ashore as a fearsome hurricane. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

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Citation: Released sea turtle carries oceanographer's ashes out to sea (2017, October 1) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-10-sea-turtle-oceanographer-ashes.html>

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