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Saving Sea Turtles, One Straw at a Time

The changing of the seasons is upon us. Later this month we will celebrate the first day of spring. For many species of animals, spring marks the beginning of breeding season. Depending on the animal, breeding season may involve elaborate courtship, defending territories, making nests, or even a perilous journey. For sea turtles, breeding season is a long time in the making and the obstacles to a successful season are everywhere.

There are currently seven living species of sea turtles. All but two species are considered Endangered or Critically Endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Four different species of sea turtles (loggerhead, green, leatherback, and hawksbill) nest on beaches in the United States, and two more (Kemp's ridley and olive ridley) spend much of their life in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The seventh sea turtle species, the Australian flatback, is found only in the waters around Australia. No matter where they live, sea turtles face a difficult journey to become parents. Depending on the species, a sea turtle may take between 15 and 50 years to reach maturity. When they are ready to nest, it is the female sea turtle who travels hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles to go back to the beach where she herself hatched to start her nest. Male sea turtles almost never go back to land once they hatch and make it to the sea, remaining as ocean-dwelling nomads throughout their lives. While agile and fast swimmers, sea turtles are slow and awkward while on land, meaning each female sea turtle is vulnerable to predators and poachers when she is ashore.

Thankfully, sea turtles nesting in the United States are fully protected by law from poaching and harassment. Organizations such as the Sea Turtle Conservancy help with efforts to protect sea turtles, fund research and rescue efforts to help them, and assist with projects that help baby sea turtles get to the ocean safely. While sea turtles are now increasingly safe on the beaches that are crucial to the survival of future sea turtle generations, they still face many perils in the oceans where they spend the majority of their lives.

One of the biggest ongoing threats to sea turtles today is exposure to pollution in the oceans. Single-use items such as straws, drink lids, bags, balloons, and bottles result in the deaths of thousands of sea turtles each year. Sea turtles may mistake plastic bags and balloons for jellyfish, one of their favorite foods, or they may ingest pieces of plastic as they graze on seagrass and seaweed. Some plastics release toxic chemicals as they break down that are harmful to sea turtles and other marine life. Since sea turtles cannot regurgitate, it is impossible for them to spit out plastic once it has been eaten. As plastics decompose inside the sea turtle's stomach, they release gases that make it impossible for a sea turtle to dive, making it easy prey for predators. A sea turtle that can't dive also has trouble finding food and may starve to death. If a sea turtle eats enough plastic, its digestive system may cease to function properly, meaning certain death.

This year at Lee Richardson Zoo, we want to make a difference for sea turtles, and we hope you will join us. We are encouraging our guests to use reusable bags to take their Safari Shoppe gift purchases home instead of single-use plastic bags. Single-use plastic bags will still be available for a \$0.25 fee, all of

which will go to support the efforts of the Sea Turtle Conservancy in their mission to save sea turtles. By the end of 2018, it is our goal to be plastic bag free at the zoo. We also have special sea turtle-themed merchandise available, with a portion of the proceeds benefitting the Sea Turtle Conservancy. We are also planning to eliminate single-use straws and drink lids in the Safari Shoppe in the future to reduce the amount of pollution from single-use plastics that we produce. You can help keep plastic away from sea turtles and waterways at home too. Say “no thanks” next time you’re offered a plastic straw, carry a reusable water bottle, purchase reusable stainless steel or glass straws to use at home, or take reusable bags with you when you shop. It is estimated that more than 60 million pounds of plastic waste will go into our oceans this year, resulting in the death of millions of marine animals, including sea turtles. Please join us this year in our quest to make the oceans cleaner and safer for sea turtles.