

July 21, 2022

United States House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife Legislative Hearing  
South Carolina Aquarium Testimony in Support of H.R. 7918

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of H.R. 7918, the Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022. As President and CEO of the South Carolina Aquarium, I write to express my emphatic support of the Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022. Alongside the National Aquarium, New England Aquarium and more than 50 other organizations permitted to rehabilitate federally protected sea turtles, we face growing costs and increasing demand without adequate public funding.

This legislation, intentionally modeled on the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Grant Program that has successfully provided nearly \$70 million to support organizations that protect marine mammals, is absolutely critical to the creation of sustainable and flexible infrastructure necessary to safeguard the survival of this federally protected species.

Our institution opened the Sea Turtle Care Center™ in 2000 and, having successfully released more than 350 sea turtles to-date, we are intimately familiar with the associated challenges. The acceleration of global climate change, plastic pollution, bycatch and habitat destruction continue to threaten these already endangered species.

As the frequency and severity of these hazards continue to grow exponentially, so too does the burden of care. At the South Carolina Aquarium, we spend nearly \$1 million annually in support of sea turtle rehabilitation.

Rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing sea turtles is not a mandate, it is our duty; one we approach with passion and perseverance. After more than two decades operating the Sea Turtle Care Center, we recognize both the sea turtle's ecological importance as well as its influence as an iconic ambassador of conservation. As one of our planet's most charismatic creatures, sea turtles capture the public imagination and inspire environmental stewardship among coastal communities and beyond.

National research indicates that the rehabilitation of marine animals is critically meaningful and helps drive citizen engagement in conservation initiatives.<sup>1</sup> Particularly, the public perceives the risk to sea turtles posed by plastic and marine debris, and is moved to change personal behaviors and support public policy and associated mitigation efforts to curb pollution.

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<sup>1</sup> Liordos V, Kontsiotis VJ, Anastasiadou M, Karavasias E. Effects of attitudes and demography on public support for endangered species conservation. *Sci Total Environ*. 2017 Oct 1;595:25-34. doi: 10.1016/j.scitotenv.2017.03.241. Epub 2017 Apr 1. PMID: 28376425.

With their existence threatened, we risk losing not only a vital portion of our planet's biodiversity, but an essential emissary of conservation action.

Sea turtle species face several anthropogenic threats, including gear entanglements, boat strikes, plastic entanglement and cold-stun events of increasing magnitude, and artificial light produced by roadways, homes and light pollution along our coast causes severe disruption to sea turtle nesting.

Six of the world's seven sea turtle species are found within U.S. waters and southeastern U.S. coastal areas provide critical nesting habitat for many of these animals. While we at the Aquarium take the issue of wildlife conservation seriously, I'm proud to say the citizens and constituents of South Carolina tenaciously share in that responsibility.

South Carolinians have become staunch defenders of these vulnerable creatures. In South Carolina, we recognize the loggerhead sea turtle as our official reptile, and our citizens proudly comprise one of the largest communities of sea turtle conservation volunteers in the U.S. Thousands along the coast participate in beach patrol, nest relocation and protection, and stranding research. To date, South Carolina upholds 21 local ordinances designed to protect and mitigate the human impact on our local sea turtle populations.

Over the years, the behind-the-scenes tours of the Aquarium's hospital have garnered significant support, and our sea turtle release events attract thousands of public on-lookers. Our rehabilitation efforts have proved to be such a public draw that the Aquarium opened the Zucker Family Sea Turtle Recovery™ exhibit in 2017 — a new public-facing sea turtle rehabilitation center and the first of its kind in an accredited aquarium. This interactive interpretive landscape offers guests the opportunity to view turtle patients in advanced stages of rehabilitation, and it provides multi-media STEM learning for children of all ages, across our region, nation, and even internationally.

Guest surveys illustrate that witnessing sea turtle rehabilitation can be a powerful agent for environmental action, and between 2017 and 2020, the Zucker Family Sea Turtle Recovery exhibit became one of the Aquarium's most beloved and impactful exhibits. Our state's passion for sea turtle conservation is fully realized within the walls of this one-of-kind of exhibit.

In March of 2020, the Aquarium faced an existential threat to our operation resulting from the closure of our doors during the early months of the pandemic. Operating revenues declined by more than 40% and the resultant 25% reduction in force and scaled back operations threatened to shutter the Aquarium's renowned Sea Turtle Care Center. The South Carolina Aquarium has one of only a few CT machines large enough to examine adult loggerhead, leatherback and green sea turtles and, for the first time in our history, our team was forced to refuse out-of-state patients.

The economic impact of the pandemic cast into sharp relief the delicate nature of our Sea Turtle Care Center's existence. An emergency fundraising appeal to the public enabled the Sea Turtle Care Center to remain operational and to ultimately return to full functional capacity. Once again, the people of our great state stood in proud defense of sea turtle conservation, and it is only with their support that our rehabilitation efforts continue today. Still, the threat of economic risk arising from global or catastrophic conditions creates ongoing uncertainty about the program's sustainability.

There is currently no funding program that is directly available to permitted organizations that rescue and rehabilitate endangered sea turtles. The Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022 will create a federal grant program to support the rescue, recovery and treatment of stranded sea

turtles, along with collection of data from stranded sea turtles for scientific research. If passed, this bill will allow organizations to apply for direct funding to support this essential work.

The citizens of South Carolina continue to demonstrate a passion for the protection of one of our planet's most iconic creatures. However, the burden of responsibility should not fall to us alone. Just as sea turtles face increasingly hostile conditions and suffer the effects of climate change and habitat destruction, so too do we shoulder higher costs and our rescue, rehabilitation and release efforts are untenable without your assistance.

The South Carolina Aquarium stands amongst more than three dozen members of Congress, from both sides of the aisle, and 46 organizations from 24 states that recognize the critical nature of this bipartisan legislation. We respectfully request Congress acknowledge the need to support sea turtle stranding network organizations by passing the Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022.

Sincerely,



Kevin Mills  
President and CEO, South Carolina Aquarium