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26.10.2011 - 09.17 pm - Life & Style



CNA / Bertran Cazorla

El Prat de Llobregat (ACN).- The Foundation for the Conservation and Recovery of Marine Animals (CRAM) released eight turtles at El Prat's beach, located close to Barcelona Airport, before the excitement of hundreds of children. The turtles who had been wounded due to fishing activity, returned to the sea after their recovery at the CRAM facilities. Catalonia has 580 kilometres of coastline. Along with the numerous species of sea birds in Catalonia, there are sea turtles, rays, and marine mammals such as dolphins and whales. Some of the animals appear wounded on the beach or are trapped by fishing artefacts. CRAM works to take care of them, and promote nature conservation and awareness of the issue. Therefore, CRAM picks up marine animals, treats them in their facilities, reintroduces them in to their habitats, protects them in their natural environment and performs a constant study of them. CRAM is an NGO, working with private donations from citizens and companies, such as the savings bank La Caixa and Caja Madrid. Every year, the foundation gathers supporters interested in releasing some of the turtles they have helped recover at their facilities. Last Sunday's turtle release represented the closing ceremony of a season that saw CRAM reach almost 70 turtle releases. The President of the marine foundation, the vet Ferran Alegre, indicated that the survival of the species does not exclusively depend on the survival of some of them, but on the preservation of their natural habitat, the Mediterranean Sea.

One of the released turtles, who recovered at CRAM's recuperation pools, was found with its

shell broken as a result of a clash with a boat that also damaged its lungs. After a few months of convalescence, the families gathered at the seashore and witnessed how the turtle and the other seven turtles slowly returned to where they belong. This event is part of an initiative called '*Torna a casa 2011*', which in English translates as 'Return home 2011', that aims to demonstrate not only the return of turtles but also how their ecosystem works.

This institution specialised in the protection of marine fauna has worked together with the Catalan Government since 1994, as well as with financial entities such La Caixa and Caja Madrid in the context of social work. The turtle recovery season began in May and through these months, the CRAM has mainly admitted animals that fishermen found trapped in their nets or also those wounded by ships.

Recovery, a drop in a bucket

Since its birth, CRAM has helped over one thousand animals, at a rate of 50-60 per year, explains its President Ferran Alegre. But Alegre also stressed that their job is like a drop in a bucket as big as the Mediterranean Sea. Their main goal is public awareness at all levels: firstly, awareness aimed at fishermen, who before the existence of CRAM simply allowed the wounded animals die. Secondly they aim to make the general population aware of the issue. "When we started, people were shocked to learn that there were turtles in the Mediterranean Sea, and that they were so big", remembered Alegre, who also added that "when people get to know the problem, they end up loving the animals".

Activities that threaten the turtles existence

There are three main dangers for turtles. Firstly, fishing. Secondly, human exploitation on the coast. "Turtles come to the sand, to the beaches where they were born to build their nests, and now there are constructions, breakwaters and beach movement that represent a problem for nesting and egg laying", warned Ferran Alegre. Pollution is the third threat: "they are omnivorous animals that eat an important amount of waste material, which generate intestinal problems", alerted the vet.

Special dragging nets to avoid further damage

In order to preserve the existence of these animals, Alegre explained that the main concern is the protection of the ecosystem and the promotion of a respectful fishing activity. Therefore, CRAM is now developing, together with Caja Madrid's social section, special nets to avoid turtle capture.

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