One of the amazing things about sea turtles is that they live many decades in multiple habitats that are separated by thousands of miles. Unfortunately, at some point during their lifelong journey, they are likely to ingest, get stuck, or become entangled in discarded garbage that litters our ocean. I’ve seen turtles with plastic in their gut and hogtied with monofilament fishing line. Sometimes, I see more bizarre entanglements. On July 6, 2013, I received a call from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) informing me that a live sea turtle was stuck in a chair off Vero Beach.

As it turned out, I was the perfect person to receive this news. I have been fortunate enough, or some might say crazy enough, to hand capture thousands of sea turtles during permitted research and rescue work, including dozens weighing over 300 pounds. I immediately grabbed my gear and headed out. It didn’t take long to find the imperiled turtle. It was an adult loggerhead, making a lot of splashing as she fought to surface and breathe. While a group of curious beachgoers looked on, I borrowed a board from the lifeguards and paddled off the beach.

There are several things you should know about loggerheads, one is they are federally protected and two is they like to bite. Fortunately they have slow reaction times, or I would look like a crusty pirate with missing appendages. This turtle was no exception, which is a good sign because a feisty loggerhead is a healthy one. I saw that she was tightly wedged in the base of a metal chair. After ditching the board, I swam up, grabbed her from behind and kicked the two of us to the beach.

The reaction from shore was inspiring. At least four beachgoers helped me get her out of the water, free her from the chair and hold her during my examination. She was in good shape at just over 3-feet-long and weighing approximately 220 pounds. We released her to a round of applause. The chair was taken to a more appropriate resting place, next to the nearest garbage can. This one undoubtedly came from a boat, though it is common to see beach chairs end up in the water. The rescue was a reminder that we can unintentionally affect marine life through careless action, including those many of us admire, the sea turtles.

Photos and story by Rick Herren. Rick is a marine biologist who has specialized in sea turtle research and monitoring for over 20 years. He lives with his wife Laura in Vero Beach. If you encounter a sea turtle, manatee or other large marine animal in distress, you can help by calling 1-888-404-FWCC.