

campus



Marine biologist Dr. David Owens will use this elaborate photoelectric network known as the Kleerekoper tank system

to study Atlantic Ridley turtles. The project is funded by Texas A&M's Sea Grant Program.

A&M biologist heads study  
**Efforts joined to save turtles**

A Texas A&M University marine biologist who was 21 when he first saw the ocean is now spearheading research that will be used in the cooperative international effort to save the world's most endangered species of sea turtle, the Ridley.

Fewer than 2,000 adult Ridley turtles are believed to exist today, said Dr. David Owens, and their habitat near Rancho Nuevo in Jalisco, Mexico, has been threatened even more by oil from the runaway Campache Bay spill.

Several turtles have died from apparently mistaking globs of oil for fishy they sometimes eat, he said.

Although many of the current turtle conservation projects utilize the phenomenon of imprinting, in which an animal instinctively recalls its place of birth, no scientific study has ever confirmed that Ridelies, or any other species, use imprinting to find their way back to the Mexican nesting beaches, Owens said.

Nor has imprinting been proven as a factor in the United States reintroduction and preservation project taking place on Padre Island and Galveston where Owens will borrow the turtles for his special research project.

Under a \$36,000 Sea Grant College program, Owens is attempting the first such study of imprinting and

will obtain special permission from the United States and Mexico to bring Ridelies to College Station for extensive behavior studies.

Owens' findings are aimed at telling federal conservation programs in both countries whether imprinting plays a role in the turtle's return to its nesting site.

If it does, Ridley eggs can be transplanted to Padre Island and, theoretically, those animals that survive will come back to Texas to nest and reproduce where scientists can watch them.

If imprinting is not present in Ridelies, new methods must be mapped out to protect their breeding, said Owens.

In the past the economic value of the turtle has caused thousands of Ridelies to be slaughtered as they came ashore 200 miles south of Texas' tip to lay eggs, Owens said.

In nature only two or three turtles might survive from an estimated five-year production of 1,500 eggs per female, underscoring the potential value and need for protection during breeding and the first weeks of life, he said.

Owens will conduct a number of behavioral tests on the Ridelies as they mature in the Kleerekoper tank system here that is used to study swimming species such as sharks,

other fish and turtles.

Developed by Texas A&M biology professor emeritus Herman Kleerekoper, the tanks use photoelectric cells and computers to map behavioral preferences and patterns of movement.

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**Tolls urged for Texas roads**

Toll roads can alleviate the problem of declining highway maintenance in Texas and adjoining states, says Texas A&M University's vice president for engineering and non-renewable resources Fred J. Benson.

"Transportation of both people and goods in Texas and the nation is, with the exception of long range travel by airplane, almost completely dependent on highway vehicles," Benson said.

Studies have shown that highway industry costs have increased at a rate in excess of inflation.

Federal and state gasoline tax increases have been discussed as a solution, as has users bearing the cost of highway construction and maintenance.

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