

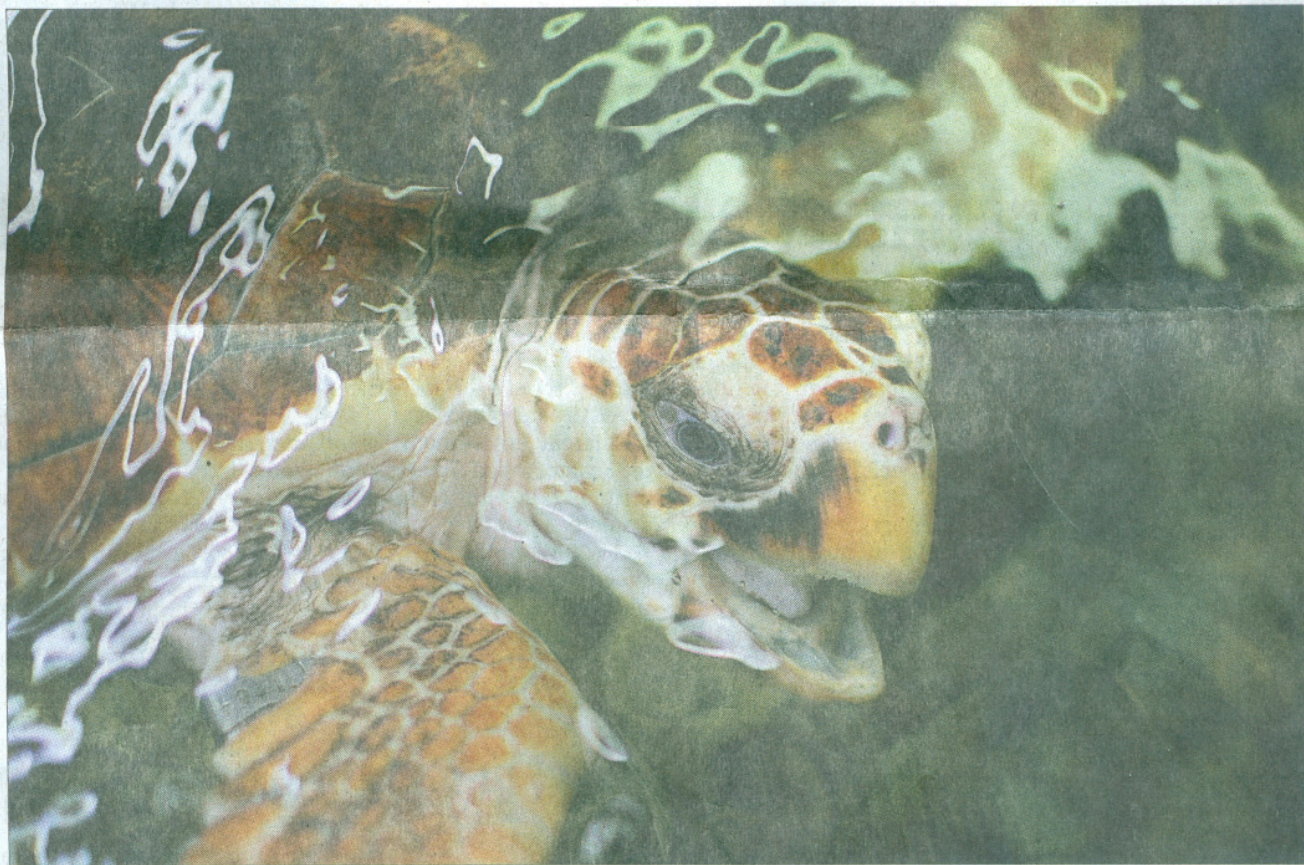
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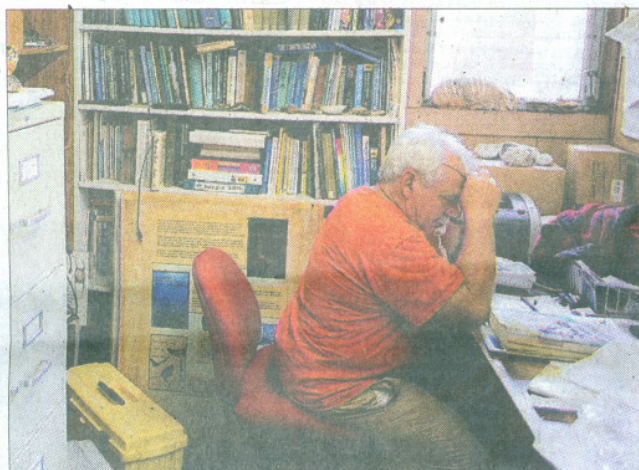
A modern Noah's Ark?



EDMUND D. FOUNTAIN | Times

A loggerhead sea turtle surfaces at the Gulf Specimens Marine Lab. Workers are trying to save the species from the oil spill.

Workers at a Florida laboratory are working hard not only to save their lab, but also the animals around it.



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Before the oil hits Panacea, Jack Rudloe is trying to gather as many sea creatures as he can at his marine lab.

BY BEN MONTGOMERY
Times Staff Writer

PANACEA

Jack Rudloe saw the future of his little slice of Florida a few nights ago, on an insomniac hike on the beach. He shined his flashlight at what should've been sea foam. It was not.

"I don't know what it is," Rudloe said, holding a bag of the brown goop up to the light the other day. "I've never seen anything like it in my life."

The oil has been inching this way. Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama. Pensacola. Panama City. The people of Panacea, a fall-down fishing town in the path of the black monster, are past the point of trying to hope the thing goes away.

"It's almost here," Rudloe says. "We're going to get creamed."

But the people here have a special relationship with the water. They talk about the gulf as if it is family. It puts mullet in their bellies and dollar bills in their pockets and, as baleful as the black blob lurking out there is, they're not yet ready for a funeral.

» See LAB, 7A

More on the spill

» Citing economic harm, a federal judge blocked a six-month moratorium on deepwater drilling projects the Obama administration had imposed. **7A**

» The federal spill response commander said BP is looking into whether pipelines could be extended from the leaking well to several production platforms in the gulf.

» LAB continued from 1A

Panacea lab begins modern Noah's Ark

At the Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratory on the edge of town, they are hard at work. They're hauling pipe and digging trenches and burying tanks big enough to hold thousands of gallons of unspoiled saltwater.

Jack Rudloe has a plan.



Up U.S. 98, past Coyote's Mullet Shuffle Inn and the Coastal Restaurant and the sign for 25-cent oysters, Rudloe hustles into a concrete company and tells the man behind the counter he needs a big septic tank, the biggest one the company has.

"When do you need it?" the man asks.

"Soon," Rudloe says. "The oil is coming."

"I know," the man says. "I heard sharks and dolphins are washing up near Panama City today."

Rudloe rubs his eyes. He has to hurry.

He's not sure his plan will work, but he has to try.

The idea came to him at a fundraiser for the lab, which is open to the public and draws tourists and school kids to Panacea. The lab is set up now to pump clean water directly from the gulf. Would it be possible to retrofit all the tanks and store enough clean sea water to keep 300 species alive for a very long time?

"Scientifically, it's questionable," Rudloe says. "But what do you tell the little kids who are asking about the oil spill? You have to tell them you're doing everything you can do."

He calls it Operation Noah's Ark.

All this is new for the 67-year-old, who has made his life studying the abundant gulf, collecting specimens, giving lectures and writing books. Rudloe has been in love with nature since he was a boy in Brooklyn. He bought a pet shop out of turtles.



Source: ESRI, TeleAtlas Times

In the 45 years Rudloe has run the Gulf Specimen Co., he has witnessed things beautiful and sacred on the water. He has seen conchs spew ribbons of accordion-like egg capsules and a sea turtle drag her shell over the sand to lay eggs. He has heard male porpoises let out longing calls for their mates.

And he has fought to protect the water. He led a fight to keep developers from turning Fiddler's Point into condos. He teaches children about conservation. After the *Exxon Valdez* spill, Rudloe said, he mailed his Exxon credit card back to the company in a bag of oil.

Now this.

Rudloe said he recently saw hundreds of dead pin fish floating on the water. He doesn't know what killed them, but he has theories.

He always thought the gulf would be here. He never thought he'd be trying to save it.

Back in the car. Rudloe stops at a failed shrimp farm where volunteers have been pumping gulf water into holding pools.

"This tank is low," he tells one of them. "It must've leaked."

"Yeah," the man replies.

He peeks into another tank. And another. Same thing. Most of them are leaking.

"We've got to fill up the tanks that work and cut our losses on these others and get out," he says. "I'm not ready to surrender."



Back at the lab, the nurse sharks rest at the bottom of a big pool. Middle school kids walk from tank to tank, gazing at the sea roaches, calico crabs, bay scallops and electric rays. They pet the starfish and make faces at the sheepshead.

Rudloe answers his phone.

"Where's the oil at?" he asks.

"We're in trouble."

"Oh, I know it's coming."

Rudloe tried to file a claim with BP to pay for the tanks and pipes, but he was told he hasn't lost anything yet. Still, the bills are piling up.

Outside, men unload a donated water tank from a trailer. Another is on its way.

The people of Panacea have shown up to help. One woman, who spent the previous day crying, showed up and sweated and said she felt much better.

"People want something to do now," says Serge Latour, 62. "This is what we can do. Try to save all this stuff."

Rudloe wants to get the tanks in the ground and put the volunteers on a boat to go out to collect more species before it's too late. There are 300 different creatures here, but there are hundreds more in the gulf.

"It's just a whole other fantastic world down there," he says. He pauses. "And I hope it's not all dead."

Maybe the oil will be capped and cleaned up before sea life in the gulf is wiped out. But if it isn't, 20 or 30 years from now, volunteers may walk baby shrimp down to the lifeless water, turn them loose and give thanks to Jack Rudloe's Ark.

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