



Nickel's Reef

Knock, knock, knock.

Michelle Sattler taps on the edge of the platform three times and waits. Soon she sees ripples in the water. Then Nickel, a green sea turtle, pokes up her head.

Michelle reaches out and pats Nickel's wide shell. The sea turtle swims closer, ready to eat her lunch.

Michelle has taken care of Nickel since 2003. That's when the turtle came to live at Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. She had deep cuts in her shell from being hit by a boat where she used to live, in Florida.

After a turtle is hit by a boat, it may have trouble swimming the same way as other turtles. The doctors at the animal hospital in Florida helped Nickel get better, but now the way she swims makes it unsafe for her to live in the ocean.

When Nickel arrived at Shedd Aquarium, the veterinarians examined her closely. They took an X-ray and discovered something strange in her throat. It looked like a coin!

The doctors used a small grabber tool to remove it. It was a 1975 nickel, and that's how Nickel got her name. Ever since, Nickel has been a healthy and active turtle, even though she still swims funny — with her head down and her bottom up.

Nickel's home now is the Caribbean Reef habitat at Shedd. She shares the habitat with several hundred other reef animals, such as stingrays, parrotfish, and eels.

When Michelle and other animal care staff members call Nickel, she usually comes right away. They teach her how to help them care for her by showing her how to position her body. She learns quickly through positive reinforcement, which means she gets a reward whenever she does a certain kind of behavior. For instance, Nickel has learned to

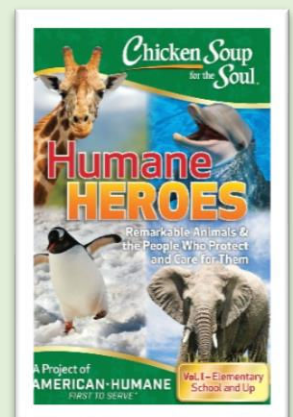
recognize a shape or target that is only used for her caregiving. It's a yellow circle with black stripes. Through training, Nickel has learned to swim onto a special platform. The platform lifts out of the water so she can be weighed regularly. She weighs nearly 200 pounds. That's more than many grown-up people! Whenever Nickel swims to her target or onto the platform, she gets a reward.

What kind of reward does Nickel get? Often it's food: usually a piece of a sushi roll — without fish — made for her each day. The staff members who prepare the food start with a slab of gel that is filled with vitamins and other nutrients Nickel needs. They wrap it with nori, or seaweed, just like sushi. Then they wrap it in lettuce leaves. Then they roll it again with more nori. They cut the roll into small round slices and serve them to Nickel one by one during her training sessions.

Nickel likes to eat so much that she sometimes tries to steal a snack when it's feeding time for other animals in the Caribbean Reef. To try to keep her from eating too much, Shedd volunteers sit on top of the habitat holding a head of lettuce. They let Nickel munch on this healthy food, and they scrub her shell while the other animals eat.

Nickel's scales and hard shell are surprisingly sensitive to touch. So giving her rubs — sometimes called "Nickel tickles" — is another way to reward her. The turtle holds still to have her flippers massaged, and she will sometimes curl her back flippers around Michelle's hand, as if she's holding it. She loves having her shell rubbed with a scrub brush so much that Michelle and Nickel's other caregivers made her a special board covered with brushes. Any time she wants, Nickel can swim up to the board and rub her shell against it.

Despite her unusual way of swimming, Nickel has figured out ways to adapt. When it's time to sleep, she wedges herself under coral and rocks in the habitat so she doesn't float up. There, she dozes comfortably. Until she hears a familiar three knocks, which means Michelle is back to visit with her again.



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