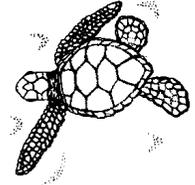


Turtle Tracker



Volusia & Flagler Sea Turtle Volunteer News

Volume 10 – Issue 1

Spring 2004

Nesting Numbers for 2003

By Jo Ellen Basile

Nesting numbers throughout the state of Florida were low in 2003, due mostly to a decline in loggerhead nesting, our most common sea turtle species. In Volusia County, the 1,748 nests laid were below the previous five-year average of 2,196 per season. It is the third lowest nesting year we have documented since our group began comprehensive monitoring of Volusia County in 1993. The lowest year was 1997 with only 1,292 nests, and our highest year was 2000 with 2,503 nests.

Flagler County fared much better in 2003 with 367 nests, which is above the five-year average of 319 nests. The highest year in Flagler was 385 nests in 2002. A chart of 2003 nesting numbers for the monitoring areas in Flagler and Volusia Counties is on the back page of this newsletter.

It is usually not cause for concern when nesting fluctuates year to year. Sea turtles do not nest every year, but instead, nest in two- to four-year cycles. For the first time, however, the nesting trend in Volusia County is no longer increasing as it was, and in some areas, such as Ponce Inlet, there is a significant decrease. Only 18 nests were laid in Ponce Inlet in 2003, compared to our highest year in 1999 when 69 nests were laid.

We can only conjecture why nesting numbers are lower. Statewide, the lower nesting numbers in Central Florida counties corresponded with the unusual cold water upwelling that occurred during the

peak months of nesting season. Another cause may be that the number of mature nesting turtles has decreased. This was another record year for sea turtle strandings (dead or debilitated turtles) with 1,765 reports, breaking the previous record of 1,351 strandings in 2001. Many of the strandings are due to manmade causes, such as drowning in shrimp nets and boat hits. In addition, diseases have greatly affected sea turtle populations, especially in South Florida. Suspected causes of these diseases include the Herpes virus and toxins ingested from food sources.



First stranding of 2004, loggerhead turtle entangled in netting and fishing line. Slowly starved to death before washing ashore

All of this simply means we cannot give up in our efforts to protect the turtles with which we share our beaches and waters. It will be many years before we see if this is a natural fluctuation in a species that has been on earth for millions of years, or a harbinger of things to come.

Report sick or injured sea turtles

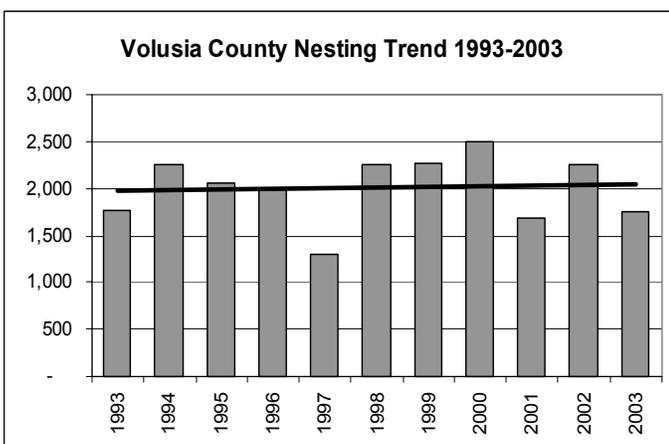
New Smyrna Beach: 386-290-0737

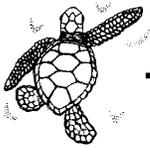
North of Inlet: 386-767-5257

Marine Science Center: 386-304-5544

Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission

1-800-404-FWCC





Lighting Disorientations Still a Threat

By Jo Ellen Basile

Volusia County has had a Sea Turtle Protection Ordinance that stipulates no light shall illuminate the beach during nesting season since December 1989. In spite of this, lighting disorientations continue to be the number one documented threat to turtle nests on our beaches. Each nesting season, thousands of hatchlings (baby turtles) have been affected or killed by beachfront lighting that leads them astray from their trek to the ocean. Many die of dehydration or are eaten by predators. Others are lost in storm drains or run over on the beach ramps and highway.

In June 1999, the ordinance was strengthened and the county committed to better enforcement as mitigation for the Incidental Take Permit that allows beach driving. Since then, the 2½ staff positions dedicated to better enforcement were reduced to one part-time position, and the most flagrant violators, such as the Main Street Pier and Boardwalk in Daytona Beach, have been declared in compliance. On any given night, it is easy to read a book on the beach in front of these establishments.

Although some violators are brought before the code board and fined, the more flagrant violators are not. Nests have disoriented directly to these establishments, and the cumulative glow from the many exceptions to the rules contributes to many other disorientations.

In September 2002, Volusia Turtle Patrol members surveyed portions of the beach and reported 90 lighting violations to code enforcement. Again in July 2003, we surveyed the beach and reported 102 violations. At least 30 of these were the same ones reported the previous year. Code enforcement staff said that many of these lights were not found to be in violation. Unfortunately, this is the “rose-colored glasses” of politics at work. The lights reported by us were clearly visible and illuminating the beach. Many minor lighting violations were not even reported, in order to focus on the brightest problems first.

Nest disorientations in Volusia County are above average again this year and have not decreased since the implementation of the ITP in 1996. In 2003, the Turtle Patrol documented 25 disorientations, with 1,158 disoriented hatchlings and 53 dead hatchlings reported. This was 13% of the nests in our 25 miles of monitoring area. The New Smyrna Beach area also

had a very high number of nest disorientations.

It is unfortunate that this problem continues in spite of very good laws and plans to manage it. Volusia County has succeeded in making other improvements in sea turtle protection, including the very wonderful Marine Science Center for sea turtle rehabilitation in Ponce Inlet. This is proof that Volusia County can do the right thing. Let’s hope that it eventually extends to beachfront lighting.

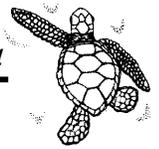
Beautiful Hawksbills Rare Nesters

By Jo Ellen Basile

The hawksbill sea turtle is another species that rarely nests in the United States, with only a few nests found on the east coast of South Florida each year. In 2002, the first documented hawksbill nest in the Florida Keys was laid at Bahia Honda. A hatchling that had been caught in roots of that nest was recently one of three released in the Dry Tortugas on February 20, 2004.



I accompanied Richie Moretti, founder of The Sea Turtle Hospital in Marathon, Florida, on the release. We were hosted by the Yankee Freedom II, a high-speed catamaran that takes tourists on day-trips to historic Fort Jefferson at Dry Tortugas National Park. On our 70-mile trip from Key West to the park, we entertained passengers with sea turtle talks. Several children and park ranger Niki Ryan helped us release the three hawksbills after another talk to the gathered tourists. It was pure joy for this 15-year veteran of sea turtle protection to share this with Richie, who is a true environmental hero, and watch the released hawksbills explore their new home at the fort’s pristine reef. Bon voyage!



ADOPT A SEA TURTLE NEST



Help Save a Threatened Species!

Sea turtles have been nesting on our beaches for over 100 million years. The population of these ancient mariners has been greatly depleted by loss of nesting habitat, incidental catch by fisheries and exploitation for sea turtle products. Without the help of people like you, they could face extinction in the near future.

By adopting a sea turtle nest, you will provide funding to the nonprofit Turtle Patrol and show your support for the protection of an endangered species.

Sponsorship Fee \$25.00

Adopter Name _____

Address _____

City, State _____

Zip _____ Phone # _____

Please make check payable to:

Volusia/Flagler Turtle Patrol

4738 S. Peninsula Drive

Ponce Inlet, FL 32127

Here's what you will receive when you adopt a sea turtle nest:

- * official adoption certificate
- * one year subscription to the Turtle Tracker
- * sea turtle educational packet
- * nest watching guidelines (**hands on adoptions**)
- * nest success evaluation report
- * picture of your nest
- * 1 bumper sticker

If you really want to get involved, you can do a "Hands On" adoption!

This actually involves babysitting a sea turtle nest. You will go to the beach in the evening to check "your" nest and report back to the Turtle Patrol if there are any problems. You will provide valuable protection for the nest, and you may even be lucky enough to see the hatchlings emerge from their nest and crawl to the sea!



Regular Adoption _____

Hands On Adoption _____

Adoptions requested after August 15 will be filled the following nesting season.

