

**INDIAN RIVER COUNTY, FLORIDA
BOARD MEMORANDUM**

DEPARTMENTAL

TO: Jason E. Brown, County Administrator

THROUGH: Richard B. Szpyrka, P.E., Public Works Director

THROUGH: Eric Charest, Natural Resources Manager

FROM: Quintin D. Bergman, M.S., Environmental Specialist

SUBJECT: Update on the current 2020 Sea Turtle Nesting Season

DATE: July 6, 2020

This is an update to inform the Board of County Commissioners, Indian River County's (IRC) residents and visitors of the current status of the 2020 sea turtle nesting season on the beaches within IRC. Additional information relative to the County's sea turtle Habitat Conservation Plan and annual nesting information can be found on the County website www.ircgov.com/coastal and on the County Coastal Division Facebook page: @IRCcoastal.

DESCRIPTION AND CONDITIONS

Background Information - Indian River County beaches make up a portion of the nesting range for three species of sea turtles (Leatherback, Loggerhead, and Green). Sea turtles are long-lived species that take up to 20-25 years to become mature adults and can live up to 100 years or more. Long-term monitoring is vital to the understanding of sea turtle populations. In 2004 the County implemented a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) that established a framework for sea turtle conservation efforts within the County. County Staff hold a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Marine Turtle Permit in which HCP referenced conservation activities are permitted. Conservation goals are monitored via daily nesting surveys throughout nesting season, beach monitoring activities, implementation of programs to reduce human and predatory impacts, and local community education and involvement.

Nest Monitoring - 2020 started the 16th year of county-wide monitoring since the HCP was implemented. Data collected over these years not only informs County staff of annual nesting numbers but can be used to identify long-term and emerging trends. Annually, sea turtle nesting season in IRC occurs between March 1st and October 31st. The July 4th weekend marks the half-way point of the nesting season. This year, the County received its first leatherback nest March 13th, loggerhead on April 8th, and green May 18th. Nest numbers are on track for the loggerheads and green turtles when compared to recent seasons. Nest numbers for leatherbacks are well above average compared to recent years. Leatherbacks are usually the first to arrive in IRC and may have already finished their nesting efforts for this season. IRC residents and visitors can observe the loggerhead nesting activity start to slow within the coming weeks per the usual nesting schedule. While the green turtles are the last to arrive to our sandy beaches for nesting,

we can expect this species to continue nesting into September. The current nesting numbers are displayed in the table below.

Indian River County	
2020 Sea Turtle Nest Count	
Loggerheads	4318
Greens	408
Leatherbacks	72
As of 7/2/2020	

Local Conservation Efforts - The County and oceanfront municipalities within the County have sea turtle friendly lighting ordinances that go into effect on March 1st and end October 31st in order to prevent adult and hatchling disorientation due to artificial light. These ordinances direct home and business owners to either turn off their lights or make sure they are not visible from anywhere on the beach after 9pm. Thus far into the nesting season several nests have hatched and unfortunately some hatchlings have become disoriented from artificial lighting, resulting in hatchling turtles meeting their demise rather than reaching the ocean. Multiple lighting surveys are conducted throughout the nesting season along all beaches in the County. As guided under the HCP, County staff not only act as a resource for surveys in unincorporated areas, but work cooperatively with municipal partners to identify and resolve lighting problems. This work would not be possible without the coordination between the City of Vero Beach, Town of Indian River Shores and IRC. Staff also respond to sick, injured and dead sea turtles, as requested by FWC, and encourages members of the community to help report stranded turtles by calling 1-888-404-3922. Data collected from these turtle strandings help inform local and state managers about human and predator impacts. All residents and visitors to IRC can help sea turtles and other marine life by disposing of trash and plastics properly, selecting sustainably caught fish, and keeping the beach clean, dark and flat.

Community Involvement - Community members can be involved in local conservation efforts by attending permitted educational programs in the area.

- Turtle Walks - night-time educational guided tours to view a nesting loggerhead, are led by many organizations in the area, such as The Sea Turtle Conservancy or Florida Power & Light.
- Turtle Digs - offer the public an opportunity to witness how sea turtle reproductive success is evaluated. These events occur sporadically in July and August, and are led by local organizations such as The Sea Turtle Conservancy or Coastal Connections.
- Turtle Rehabilitation – Permitted facilities around the state take injured turtles and provide rehabilitative care and treatment until the turtle is healthy enough to be released back to the wild. Organizations such as the Loggerhead Marine Life Center or Sea World are recognized rehabilitation centers.

- FWC's website (<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/sea-turtle/where-to-view/>) identifies locations with the above mentioned opportunities for the public to view sea turtles. Events/venues may be cancelled or altered considering COVID-19 risks.
- Sick or injured turtles that are sent to rehab centers and recover their health and are returned to the wild. The opportunities to view live sea turtle releases are sporadic and will be announced through the Coastal Division's Facebook page.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Board approve this update of the 2020 Sea Turtle Nesting Season presentation for broadcast on the Government TV channel for a period of 30-days beginning on July 15, 2020.

APPROVED AGENDA ITEM FOR: July 14, 2020