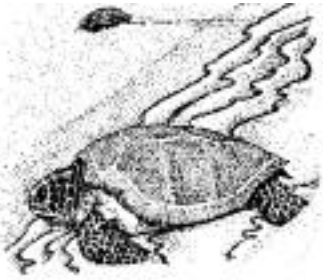


Sea Turtles of Canaveral National Seashore

Sea Turtles



Canaveral National Seashore serves as an important nesting area for sea turtles. During the months of May through August, giant sea turtles lumber ashore to nest on the beach. Three species are known to nest within the park: the loggerhead, leatherback, and green turtles. Loggerheads lay 3,000 - 4,000 nests per year. Up to three hundred greens and only a few leatherbacks deposit eggs within the park boundaries each nesting season.

The sea turtles lay approximately 100 round, white, leathery eggs in each nest. Before 1984, most of the eggs laid within the seashore were eaten by raccoons and to a lesser extent by ghost crabs. Some nests are lost when beaches erode during storms.

If the eggs survive, they begin to hatch in about sixty days. The first turtles to hatch will wait until their nest-mates have left their eggshells. Because of the depth of the nest, it would be difficult for one three-inch hatchling to emerge from the eighteen-inch deep nest by itself. There is also safety in numbers. When the cool sand signals the safety of nighttime, the hatchling gradually dig their way out of the nest in a united effort to make their way to the sand's surface.

Many hazards await the hatchling when they reach the surface of the nest. Ghost crabs, birds, raccoons, and the drying heat of the early morning sun are waiting for the tiny turtles as they try to make it to the ocean.

Once the turtles make it past the surf, they swim to a region of the Atlantic Ocean known as the Sargasso Sea, a large area of seaweed which drifts with the ocean currents. Here the hatchlings feed on seaweed and tiny animals and seek protection from predators. When they reach adolescence, some turtles return to the inshore waters of Mosquito Lagoon.

The ocean holds more hazards than just the sea turtles' natural predators. Many deaths are attributed to entanglement in fishing lines, collision with ships and boat propellers, drowning in commercial fishing nets and ingesting plastic fragment and congealed oil.

RESEARCH

In the early 1980's researchers, found raccoons were destroying 98% of Canaveral's turtle nests. The park began a program to help reverse this trend. After experimenting with several different ways of protecting the eggs, park rangers found that by securing a wire mesh screen over the nest, raccoons were prevented from digging into it. The small hatchlings could still exit the nest through the openings in the mesh. During the months of May through August, park rangers and volunteers work each night to screen the nests. After two months, when the eggs have hatched, the screens are removed and one of every ten nests is excavated to monitor the success rate. Over 80% of the turtle nests have been protected using this method.

YOU CAN HELP

Possessing turtle parts is illegal. Leave any dead sea turtle you may find undisturbed. Write down where you found the turtle and if it is tagged, the number, colors and type of tag. All sea turtles are classified as either threatened or endangered species, and are protected by federal law. Moving a carcass or removing parts from one is prohibited by the Endangered Species Act. If the turtle was found at Canaveral National Seashore report the finding to the Information Center or Ranger Station or call (904) 428-3384 or (321) 867-4077. If found outside the park, call the Florida Marine patrol at (321) 383-2740 or 1-800-342-2740.

Attend a conducted program or a nighttime "Turtle Watch" to learn more about sea turtles. Turtle Watches take place in June and July. Reservations are taken in May for the programs. For more information about sea turtle, visit this website.

<http://www.cccturtle.org/contents.htm>

