

Share the Beach: Teamwork for Turtles

by Hailey B. Hartman



**Loggerhead hatchlings head
for the ocean.**

USFWS photo

*F*ive blurry faces peer expectantly over the edge of a black tarp at a seemingly insignificant indentation in the sand. The silvery moonlight illuminates their anxious faces and the rippling, multifaceted surface of the nearby sea. Suddenly, the grains of sand shift, ever so slightly, and a tiny dark green flipper pokes out. Secretive smiles are shared all around the group and a quiet elation is felt by all present. Moments later, a little head emerges and tiny black eyes blink at the light while the sea turtle hatchling lays motionless, with only half of its small body visible. The little loggerhead is exhausted, but it still has a much greater journey ahead of it tonight. For now, the only thought on anyone's mind is one of simple joy: after months of waiting, the babies are finally here.

“Share the Beach” is a sea turtle conservation program, the result of the collaborative efforts in Alabama of the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Daphne Ecological Services Field Office and Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge; Gulf State Park; and numerous volunteers along the Alabama Gulf coast. Our mission is to monitor, protect, and minimize impacts to sea turtles and their hatchlings as part of a larger effort to enhance successful nesting along the Alabama coast. These goals are achieved through a variety of approaches, always combining biology with education so that the benefits of the activities extend beyond the actual relocation, hatching, or excavation of a nest.

The impact of the Share the Beach program on sea turtle nesting and



Photo by David Goethe

hatching is difficult to assess, as 2002 was only the program's second year. However, if you were to ask one of the many invaluable community volunteers, you would likely hear a response that resounds with praise for the program. Share the Beach functions primarily on the assumptions that people simply love these turtles, realize the detrimental effects that certain human activities have caused, and wish to contribute to sea turtle recovery.

Each morning during nesting season, volunteers and interns patrol more than 35 miles (56 kilometers) of Alabama's coastline, hoping to spot distinctive sea turtle "crawls" or tracks left in the sand by the nesting females. They then identify a potential nest area within the crawl, and dig carefully—using their hands in flipper-like motion—for the eggs. Once the eggs are found, initial data measurements are taken, a predator screen is placed in the sand column between the top layer of eggs and the surface of the sand, and the nest is marked by stakes, flagging tape, and yellow signs identifying it as protected under the Endangered Species Act. Most of the sea turtle nests along the Gulf Coast are dug by loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*), although some may be from green (*Chelonia mydas*) or Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*) sea turtles.

After 55 days of incubation, a black tarp is placed around the nest to limit light pollution, a trench is dug to funnel hatchlings straight into the sea, and our waiting begins. Each night for approximately the next 20 days, the nest receives the utmost attention of the Share the Beach program participants. "Nest-sitting" requires a generous donation of time, but the end result is well worth the effort. Volunteers use stethoscopes to listen for hatchling movements inside the nests and learn to recognize visual clues, such as a depression in the sand, indicating that hatching time is near. All observations are recorded in a waterproof notebook kept at each nest for that purpose.

The magical night (or occasionally day) of hatching typically arrives soon after the scratching sounds increase and a depression becomes apparent. According to textbook descriptions, nearly all the turtles in one clutch should emerge *en masse* in their exodus to the sea. However, this year, it appears that our hatchlings didn't bother reading the textbook! Hatching episodes have spanned multiple nights, from over 100 hatchlings in the span of half an hour, to the other extreme of trickling out one or two hatchlings over the course of five or six nights. All in all, it is a miraculous experience in which to participate, one that never fails to inspire the observer with a sense of wonder.

It's not just the Share the Beach volunteers that get to experience these events. Numerous beach visitors out for a late night stroll have happened upon a hatching and walked away enraptured with sea turtles. At the same time, these visitors are educated about how they can help protect these magnificent creatures. Thus, the message and passion of conservation are spread with every tiny turtle trek to the sea, and we can hope that one day our little bit of effort will have helped these great mariners of the deep along the road to recovery.

Hailey B. Hartman was a sea turtle intern/SCA conservation associate at Bon Secour NWR during the 2002 sea turtle season.



Hailey Hartman delights in examining a newly hatched loggerhead.

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