

Lights Going Out Along The Beach Sea Turtles Returning To Brevard To Lay Their Eggs

May 5, 1991|By Cory Jo Lancaster, Of The Sentinel Staff

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COCOA — Thousands of sea turtles are swimming toward Brevard County to nest in its sandy beaches this summer before scads of curious spectators and researchers.

From May to Oct. 31, residents and businesses must turn off or shade bright oceanfront lights that lure baby hatchlings onto roadways and parking lots to their deaths.

Lighting regulations vary among Brevard County and the six beachside cities, but generally lights must be out between sunset and 11 p.m.

Despite the regulations, oceanfront lights remain a major problem for nesting females and baby hatchlings that emerge from the nests 60 days later. Researchers say populated areas in Satellite Beach and Indialantic still use so many lights that hatchlings become disoriented.

Researchers, who track the nesting patterns, find the misguided hatchlings the next morning - squashed under cars or baked in the sun. For some reason, the palm-sized turtles walk directly toward the bright lights.

The lighting problems may extend further than once believed. University of Florida graduate student Blair Witherington will track the baby turtles in the ocean this summer to determine if the glow of nearby cities cause them to lose their way.

"The glow in the sky may be the most vexing problem for the hatchlings," said University of Central Florida turtle expert Lew Ehrhart.

But until the results are known, the burden of preventing the unnecessary death of hatchlings will befall oceanfront residents.

"This is the time to bring awareness up," Ehrhart said. "The hatchlings will be coming along pretty soon. Everyone needs to be as careful with their lights as possible."

Ehrhart and a dozen UCF students will patrol 28 miles of beach from Patrick Air Force Base to Sebastian Inlet State Park every day this summer to count the number of nests.

The most plentiful are loggerhead sea turtles, a threatened species. More rare are the nests of the smaller green sea turtles, an endangered species, and the large leatherback turtles - only a few of those nest here every summer.

Nesting already has begun on Brevard's beaches. During an aerial survey last week, Ehrhart spotted six nests. A rare leatherback was the first turtle to come ashore on April 10, he said.

Last year, researchers counted 20,000 nests in the 28-mile stretch. That was a 40 percent increase over the previous year, although Ehrhart doubts that means any major comeback for the species.

"I don't think there's any reason to make that into a trend," said Ehrhart, who has recorded nesting patterns for 10 years in south Brevard. "It's just a normal variation. . . . You really need 20 years to really have a feel for what's going on."

The nesting turtles can be easily frightened, and experts caution people who want to watch to be very sensitive. The females work like crazy to crawl up the beach and one person getting too close can make her trip for naught.

As a general rule, spectators should stand back as far as possible until the female crawls up to the base on the dune and digs the nest. Once the female finishes digging and begin laying eggs, spectators can get very close without disturbing her.

Those unfamiliar with the spectators' protocol should take a guided turtle walk available at the Merritt Island Wildlife Refuge, from the Sea Turtle Preservation Society in Melbourne Beach or at Sebastian Inlet State Recreation Area.