

## Irma batters beaches, residents and baby sea turtles

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VIERA — When the outer bands of Hurricane Irma pounded the Brevard coastline Sunday night and Monday morning, it not only ate away beaches and left homes teetering on the edge on dunes, it also whisked away the region's most vulnerable residents: countless threatened and endangered baby sea turtles trying to make their way out to the Gulf Stream.

Many died, their tiny corpses strewn upon the shore.

Concerned citizens managed to rescue as many as 1,500 that the zoo has taken in so far. Now these reptile refugees are getting weighed, measured and a second chance in several rehabilitation pools at the Brevard Zoo.

The zoo emphasizes that people who find baby sea turtles should not put them back in the water and includes information on what to do on [the zoo's blog](#).

More still may be on the way, overcome by the rough seas in Irma's wake.

Almost 1,500 freshly hatched green and loggerhead sea turtles displaced by hurricanes Irma and Jose have been transferred to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for release, zoo officials announced Friday. The turtles spent the night at Gumbo Limbo Nature Center in Boca Raton and will be placed on offshore mats of seaweed Friday.

Beginning Monday, staff and volunteers from the zoo, the Barrier Island Center, the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Sea Turtle Preservation Society delivered the hatchlings and young turtles washed in from the storm to the zoo's Sea Turtle Healing Center. Staff and volunteers worked tirelessly to document and care for each individual.

Although the number of troubled turtles found on Florida's eastern coast has lessened significantly in recent days, "the behavior of Jose and future hurricanes could create another crisis in the coming weeks," zoo officials said in their Friday announcement.

Information about what to do if one finds a washed-back baby sea turtle is available at <https://brevardzoo.org/washbacks/>.

Irma also unearthed turtle nests, as the storm hammered the base of the dunes where the turtles dig their nests. The waves caused widespread erosion, leaving not just nests exposed but some homes too close to the ocean for comfort. Dune restoration projects after past storms buffered most structures from much worse damage.

"The damage to the beaches was not as severe as it was in Hurricane Matthew," said Mike McGarry, who coordinates Brevard's beach renourishment projects.

Irma still managed to turn baby sea turtles' lives upside down.

"They ride in with the seaweed and the tides and the currents," said Dave Cheney, a board member with the Indialantic-based Sea Turtle Preservation Society. "They're 20, 25 miles out in the ocean, so it takes usually several days for them to get in to the beach."

The turtles were green sea turtles, an endangered species, and loggerheads, listed as threatened.

These little guys are in much better shape than the 1,800 baby turtles washed in during last year's storms, zoo officials said.

"They're not brand new off the beach, like last-night hatchlings," Melanie Stadler, Brevard Zoo's sea turtle program coordinator, said from a veterinary building, as the din of hundreds of flippers scratching against waterless plastic pools filled the room.

Beachgoers dropped the turtles off in hatchling drop-off locations, including one at Lori Wilson Park in Cocoa Beach. The Sea Turtle Preservation Society also maintains hatchling drop-off boxes at their office in Indialantic and at the Barrier Island Center in Melbourne Beach.

The zoo will work with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to determine when the turtles will be released by boat back to the ocean, zoo officials said. Last year, the U.S. Coast Guard helped release turtles from last year's storms.

Zoo staff and volunteers feed the turtles mashed-up shrimp and squid.

More baby turtles are expected as rough seas wash back new hatchlings headed to the Gulf Stream.

Zoo officials urged people who find baby turtles not to put them back in the ocean. The turtles lack the energy to swim back out to the lines of seaweed where baby turtles go to feed. They may not be there, because of the storm.

It is illegal to take them home or transport sea turtles, unless permitted by the state. Brevard Zoo and the Sea Turtle Preservation Society have a network of volunteers permitted to handle and transport the turtles.

For instructions on how to proceed when you find turtles or eggs, they ask that people call either the Sea Turtle Preservation Society hotline at 321-206-0646 or state wildlife officials at 888-404-3922.

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#### **What to do if you find sea turtle eggs or hatchlings:**

- If hatchlings are heading toward the ocean, let them enter the surf
- If hatchlings are struggling or lethargic, take them to the Sea Turtle Preservation Society office at U.S. 192 and State Road A1A or the organization's drop-off container at north Lori Wilson Park, near the lifeguard buildings, or the drop-off box at the Barrier Island Center in Melbourne Beach
- Bury exposed eggs and nests in place using sand;
- To report injured or dead sea turtles, call the STPS hotline at 321-206-0646;
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*Source: Dave Cheney, Sea Turtle Preservation Society*

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