

Baby Sea Turtles Get Helping Hand

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MELBOURNE BEACH — Environmentalists began releasing hundreds of sea turtle hatchlings into the ocean Friday night to promote public awareness of the threatened loggerhead turtles.

The 100 turtles released on the beach were hatched in incubators by the Brevard Sea Turtle Preservation Society after being taken from nests along south Melbourne Beach.

About 75 hatchlings were released earlier this week and another 800 are expected to hatch and be released by early November, said society Director Peter Bandre.

Another 161 eggs, which were gathered by the society and given to Florida Institute of Technology, began to hatch Friday. About 95 percent of them are expected to hatch by today and then will be released Monday, said society Secretary Rick Boschen, an FIT senior in marine biology.

Although 1,000 hatchlings will be released during the next few weeks, only a handful are expected to make it past the fish who feed on them in the surf. And only one in 1,000 turtles will grow to maturity, Bandre said.

The eggs were collected along south Melbourne Beach last month because Hurricane Floyd and high tides would have destroyed them, Bandre said.

"The purpose of this is not to increase the loggerhead population," said Bandre. "It's to give turtles that definitely would have died a second chance and to generate some public interest in our society and sea turtles."

Releasing the hatchlings, for example, helps educate the public about the necessity of turning off beach lighting during the nesting season. Lights disorient baby hatchlings, which use the reflection of the moonlight to guide them to the ocean.

Five to 10 hatchlings will be kept at the society's headquarters in Melbourne Beach for educational programs and displays. When they are released next year, their chances of survival will be even higher, Bandre said. The cost of raising a turtle: about \$1,000 a year each.

