

Dim Lights Brighten Turtles' Future Sea Creatures' Nesting Season Is Approaching

March 13, 1988|By Debra K. Minor of The Sentinel Staff

4-5 minutes

MELBOURNE BEACH — Strolling along beaches in street clothes, or wearing dark clothing and riding all-terrain vehicles, members of the Sea Turtle Preservation Society night patrol are preparing to stem problems that might disturb this year's nesting and hatching season in Brevard.

Last year more than 10,000 nests averaging 100 or more eggs each were buried in a 12-mile stretch of beach between Melbourne Beach and Sebastian Inlet, said Dr. Lew Ehrhart, professor of biological sciences at University of Central Florida.

"We happen to be stewards, I think, to what happens to be the second-largest aggregation of sea turtle eggs in the world," he said. And the society's members want to make sure Brevard's turtle population remains protected.

Wearing Army goggles that amplify natural sky light at night, members will be on the lookout for violators of beach-lighting ordinances, turtle watchers and anglers with flashlights and lanterns, poachers and turtle molesters.

"The most important thing that people need to realize is that lights are a major disturbance for turtles," said Peter Bandre, founder of the south Brevard organization.

From May to October, loggerhead, green and a few leatherback turtles -- all of which are endangered -- will make their way to the south beaches to nest. Beach lighting interrupts turtles' trek and keeps them from coming up to lay eggs or makes them return to the surf before they can find a proper nesting area, Bandre said.

As a result of the turtles' plight, beach residents must observe ordinances banning distracting lights each night from a time set by each area until dawn during nesting and hatching season. Violations of the ordinances carry penalties with hefty fines.

"At the beginning of the season, it's a hassle because people forget," said Ron Knuppel, who patrols Cocoa Beach and Port Canaveral with Ken Darville. "I'm an animal lover. I care."

The mission becomes one of educating the public when patrol members discover nighttime beach visitors

and anglers with flashlights and lanterns.

Because many of these people are visitors who are unaware of the problems with unnatural lighting, patrollers take time to explain the problem.

For hatchlings, artificial beach lighting poses a threat to their already slim chance of survival. After emerging from the sand, hatchlings instinctively use light reflections from moon and stars to guide them to the ocean. Artificial light that can be seen from the beach lures the tiny turtles, often leading them into parking lots and streets, where they become prey to gulls and crabs or are smashed by passing cars. Others may die from exhaustion searching for the sea.

Other threats that patrol members will watch for are poachers and molesters. More than 1,000 eggs were lost last year to poachers and hundreds more were destroyed by people disturbing the nests or running over them in motorized vehicles, Bandre said.

Only those with special permits legally can inspect nests, possess eggs or take vehicles onto the county's beaches.

Penalties for molesting, possessing or destroying turtles, their nests, eggs or hatchlings also carry stiff fines, possible jail sentences, vehicle impoundment, and/or license suspension.

Night patrollers also watch for injured or distressed turtles and stray hatchlings.

They make sure turtles receive medical attention as soon as possible and guide hatchlings to the surf.

Bandre said anyone who finds evidence of disturbances to turtles, nests or hatchlings should contact the preservation society or law enforcement agencies.

The telephone line at the society office -- 676-1701 -- is answered 24 hours a day during the season.