

## Ill, Dying Turtles Worry Scientists

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### The Green Sea Turtles And Loggerheads Are Washing Up On The East Coast In Record Numbers.

MELBOURNE BEACH — An increase in the number of sick and dead turtles washing ashore on Florida's east coast has drawn the concern of scientists.

"It worries us tremendously. At the moment, we know very little about why it is happening," said Blair Witherington at the Florida Marine Research Institute in Tequesta.

The surge in stranded and dead turtles was abundantly clear during the past two weeks in Brevard County when 18 turtles were observed by workers with the Sea Turtle Preservation Society.

"We had 14 wash up in three days a week ago. That was amazing. There really isn't much explanation for it that we have heard yet," said Rita Karpie, a volunteer with the society.

Even biologists are puzzled. Witherington said the leading theory, so far, is that strong easterly winds during the past few weeks have pushed more of the weak and dead reptiles to the shore.

"Some have been clearly struck by a boat, others appear to have languished for some time," Witherington said. "They are emaciated with sunken eyes. Others show no apparent cause of death."

Samples of the dead turtles' livers are being sent to a Tampa laboratory to be studied for toxins, he said.

The dead and ill reptiles cover a number of types of turtles, Witherington said. The majority are green sea turtles, an endangered species, and the loggerhead, a threatened species.

In the first two months of 1995, the Marine Research Institute has logged the deaths of 64 green turtles and 24 loggerheads in the state. Comparative data for 1994 were not available Monday.

Biologists expect sea turtles to begin gathering off shore in April, the beginning of their mating season. By the first of May, female turtles will begin their trudge across east coast beaches to nest and lay their eggs.

The ill turtles have been taken to various rehabilitation sites to be nursed back to health and released, Witherington said.

Sea World has set up a relay team between Brevard and the Orlando attraction.

"Sea World workers told us last weekend that the glucose levels in some of the turtles we were recovering were so low they were undetectable," Karpie said.

She said it was apparent that the turtles had been moving slowly for some time because of the barnacles and algae on their shells.