

Lights Out On The Beach -- Turtle Nesting Season Starts

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3-4 minutes

MELBOURNE — Lights must go out tonight on beaches in Brevard County and parts of Volusia County as thousands of endangered sea turtles begin digging nests and laying eggs in the sand.

About 100 volunteers will patrol beaches in Brevard, the unincorporated sections of Volusia, New Smyrna Beach and Ormond Beach looking for violators of beachfront lighting ordinances.

The ordinances are in effect Sunday through Oct. 31, and beach patrols will be out at midnight tonight to begin recording violations.

"They better turn the lights out at midnight because we're going to be checking at 12:01," said Wayne Stinnett with the South Brevard Sea Turtle Preservation Society, whose volunteers patrol Brevard's beaches.

Artificial lights along the beaches distract nesting females and disorient hatchlings, which instinctively scramble toward the moonlit ocean surface.

This nesting season, beach patrols expect enforcement to be tougher than ever.

A bill before the state Legislature this session would give Brevard code enforcement officers the power to cite violators on the spot with fines of up to \$250 a day.

In the past, violators had to be warned twice and then taken before a code enforcement board hearing before being fined.

The process was lengthy, and several south Brevard businesses and residents repeatedly turned their lights off right before the code enforcement hearing to sidestep any penalties.

"We expect to have this in place this turtle season," Brevard County Commissioner Andrea Deratany said of the legislative proposal. "It's unfortunate that we have to take stronger measures . . . but this will allow us to close a loophole."

In south Volusia and New Smyrna Beach, patrols already have identified potential problem areas.

Violators will be given written warnings within the next two weeks and then enforcement will begin, said Bruce Jaildagian, Greenpeace International Sea Turtle coordinator in New Smyrna Beach.

"We've already done a few patrols and informed the city and county where the violators are," he said.

"This year, we're going to be a little more insistent about infractions."

The Brevard ordinance requires oceanfront lights to be turned off from 11 p.m. to dawn in unincorporated areas, and tinted glass or film must be used on all beachfront windows above the first floor when inside lights are on. Tonight only, because the enforcement period begins May 1, lights must be turned out by midnight.

Brevard's beach cities have similar restrictions, except in Melbourne Beach, where lights along the beach must be off from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m.

In Volusia County, beachfront lights must be shielded or turned off from midnight until 7 a.m. daily. Violators can be taken to court, fined \$500 and sentenced to 60 days in jail, or they can be taken before the code enforcement board and fined up to \$250 a day.