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Melbourne Beach event celebrates World Sea Turtle Day and Archie Carr park namesake

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On June 16, which happens to be World Sea Turtle Day, the Sea Turtle Preservation Society will celebrate the birthday of the Alabama Presbyterian pastor's son who shone the first light on the real possibility that sea turtles would become extinct if we didn't start doing something to help them.

Pioneering conservationist Archie Fairly Carr Jr., a professor of zoology at the University of Florida, would have been 99 this year. His legacy includes the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, 20 miles of pristine coastline that spans from Melbourne Beach to Wabasso Beach. The refuge provides a critical habitat for about a quarter of all sea turtles nesting in the United States.

Brevard, like Carr, has played a critical part in the survival of sea turtles, with 72 miles of beaches that are perfect nesting and foraging habitats for loggerheads, green and leatherback turtles.

“Brevard is the largest nesting area in the world for loggerheads,” said Dori Hughes, a board member of the Sea Turtle Preservation Society, an all-volunteer organization established a year before Carr passed away in 1987, the year Hughes joined the grassroots group.

She had moved to Brevard from Ohio and didn’t have a clue about sea turtles, but she was impressed with the group’s passion to save the beleaguered reptiles that have roamed the seas since the days of the dinosaurs. The Satellite Beach resident is one of 50 volunteers who at 6:15 a.m. from April 30 through Sept. 15 each and every day hit the beaches of Brevard to survey the turtle nests, noting new ones and recording the success of those hatched. If some laggard hatchlings are found, the volunteers make sure they are sent on their way to the ocean as soon as possible.

The babies certainly can use the society’s help. Even if the eggs survive predation by raccoons and crabs or are not lost to storms, the hatchlings stand a mere 1 in 1,000 chance to make it to adulthood, which is around 15 to 25 years for sea turtles. The lucky ones live long enough to return to the beaches where they were hatched, which means Hughes may well have come face-to-face with adults that were babies when she first started volunteering for the society.

The Sea Turtle Preservation Society works tirelessly to educate people on the plight of sea turtles. STPS reaches thousands annually through public programs, school presentations, exhibits and turtle watches during nesting season. Anyone who has participated in a Turtle Watch will always remember the experience that includes a late-night beach walk with one of the society's permitted guides to observe nesting loggerheads, amazing creatures that have traveled thousands of miles to get back to where they were born.

To help the next generation of sea turtle lovers, the society will celebrate Archie Carr's birthday and World Sea Turtle Day with a bash that includes an art contest for students ages 5 to 19. Winners will be announced at noon on Saturday, June 16, during the celebration at the Turtle House, 111 S. Miramar Ave., Indialantic. Some of the entries will appear in the society's 2019 calendar.

The party runs from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. and includes cupcakes to honor Carr on his birthday, refreshments, story time, face painting, educational and environmental displays and photos with turtle and nest models.

A silent auction of turtle-inspired art and gifts will be held that day, and folks can now bid on the items, which are on display at the Turtle House in Indialantic.

As they do every year, Hughes and the rest of the Sea Turtle Preservation Society volunteers have provided for Carr one of the best of birthday presents he could ever have wanted.

"I think he would have been ecstatic with all the awareness that has been raised in the past few years," she said.

World Sea Turtle Day

What: A party to celebrate the birthday of sea turtle advocate the late Archie Fairly Carr Jr.

When: 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. Saturday, June 16

Where: Turtle House, 111 S. Miramar Ave., Indialantic

Info: 321-676-1701 or visit seaturtlespacecoast.org, where you can also sign up for one of the upcoming Turtle Watches.

Sonnenberg is a Melbourne-based freelance writer.

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