

Sea Turtle Preservation Society Archives

Patty Goffinet

4-5 minutes

In the early morning hours of October 7, 2016, Hurricane Matthew slid by Florida's east coast staying off-shore enough to spare Floridian's catastrophic damage to property, businesses and infrastructure. However, not so fortunate were the thousands of sea turtles that had over the previous 30 – 90 days successfully hatched from their nests, traversed our beaches to open sea and swam 25 – 30 miles offshore to the relative safety of sargassum seaweed that provides shelter and foraging habitat for baby sea turtles. If it were only Hurricane Matthew, the seaweed lines would have reformed following the storm and sea turtles would have resumed their life cycle, however, before this could occur, a high pressure/low pressure weather system set up offshore creating strong easterly winds for about two weeks following the hurricane. These high winds and waves pushed thousands of post-hatchling sea turtles back onto our shores referred to as "washbacks". This is not a common event and the last time this occurred was about 7 years ago.

Washback sea turtles that land on our beaches are critically fatigued and simply cannot swim any longer. Some well-meaning beach goers try to help by placing these helpless creatures back into the ocean where they usually drown or washback again. Washback sea turtles will not survive without proper collection, transport and rehabilitation. Thanks



to the [Sea Turtle Preservation Society](#) (STPS) they have a chance of survival. STPS provides training for its members on how to handle sea turtle washback incidents, acquires the necessary permits from the [Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission](#) Bureau of Imperiled Species and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to allow their volunteers who have received the required training to collect and transport these endangered and

threatened species to the [Brevard Zoo's Sea Turtle Healing Center](#). Once at the center, washbacks are fed and cared for so that they can be released back into the ocean once they are strong enough.

As of Thursday, November 3, 2016, 1500 washback sea turtles have been collected from Cape Canaveral to south of Melbourne Beach by STPS members with assistance from conservation minded beach goers. Once the washback sea turtles are ready for release, off-shore transport will be provided by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission or U.S. Coast Guard providing these baby sea turtles another chance at life. Volunteers at the Brevard Zoo's Sea Turtle Healing Center have informed me that about 70% of the washback sea turtles are rehabilitated and strong enough to be released. Unfortunately, too many of these beautiful creatures have ingested debilitating quantities of plastics that hamper or prevent them from recovering. This is just another reason to support the [BlueTube](#) conservation program that eliminates plastic waste from our oceans and encourages beach goers to remove plastic and other trash from our beaches.

If you observe a sea turtle in trouble, please call the STPS Sea Turtle Emergency Response Hotline at (321) 206-0646, and leave a message describing the emergency and your location and someone will return your call within minutes.

Greg Hendricks, is a 3rd generation Floridian, born in Miami where he spent most of his inspirational free



time in Key Largo exploring the Florida Keys and offshore coral reefs. Greg has a BS in Range Ecosystems Management for the University of Florida and worked 34 years with the Natural Resources Conservation Service throughout Florida and their national headquarters in Washington D.C. Greg is President of the Space Coast Regional Chapter of the [Florida Master Naturalist Program](#), and holds the title of "Advanced Florida Master Naturalist" from this University of Florida sponsored adult environmental educational program. You can find Greg volunteering as an environmental interpreter at the [Enchanted Forest Sanctuary](#) in Titusville leading hikes or as a USCG Master Captain providing eco-tours on the Banana River Lagoon estuary from his 23-foot boat. Greg can be reached at FL EcoEnterprises@cfl.rr.com.