

Reinforcements To Help Fight For Turtles

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INDIALANTIC — Lights on the town's popular oceanfront boardwalk have become so deadly to endangered sea turtle hatchlings that a turtle preservation group has asked environmentalists from Greenpeace to join its fight to get the lights turned off.

About 400 dead loggerhead hatchlings were found this weekend near the boardwalk at the east end of Fifth Avenue, said Wayne Stinnett, assistant director of the Sea Turtle Preservation Society.

"The Indialantic boardwalk is the most deadly distraction for loggerheads in the whole world," he said. "It's our biggest problem."

The town council banned artificial lights on oceanfront developments and dune crossovers after 11 p.m. during nesting season from May through October. But the ordinance provides a two-year grace period during which compliance will not be enforced.

"All the hatchlings that died there the past three nights made a beeline for lights on the boardwalk," Stinnett said Monday. "By early morning, many of them had been eaten by birds, crabs, dogs, cats and other animals.

"A single light will disorient hatchlings for a thousand yards on either side," he said. "We want those lights off real bad."

To gain support, society members will release a year-old loggerhead and about 50 hatchlings into the ocean at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at the boardwalk. Rep. Steve Pajcic, D-Jacksonville, who the society has endorsed for governor, will attend the release, as will representatives of Greenpeace, an environmental group known for saving whales; county Commissioner Andrea Deratany, who started Brevard's turtle protection effort; and other county officials.

When sea turtles hatch from 2-foot-deep nests in the sand, they instinctively use moonlight shining on the water to lead them to the sea.

Artificial lights confuse the walnut-sized hatchlings, which die when they get stuck away from the ocean and are eaten by animals or run over by automobiles.

Boy Scouts from Melbourne camped out near the boardwalk Monday night and helped society members rescue newly-hatched turtles. Because more loggerheads nest along beaches in south Brevard than anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, protecting the endangered creatures is critically important to the species' survival, experts said.

The society plans to give Indianalantic officials statistics on hatchling deaths later this year in the hope that the council will turn off the lights before they disrupt another nesting season, Stinnett said.

Another traditionally bad spot for artificial lights on the beach -- a group of motels north of Indianalantic in unincorporated Brevard -- apparently has heeded the county's turtle lighting ordinance.

At the beginning of August, county code enforcement officials said they would crack down on beach light violators by issuing fines of up to \$250 a day. This weekend, the motels on State Road A1A turned off lights by 11 p.m., Stinnett said.

To report violators of the lighting ordinance call 459-3993; to inform society members of a sea turtle or hatchling in distress, call 676-1701.