blog.nationalgeographic.org

Sea Turtle “Washbacks” on Florida’s Coastline: What you can do to help – National Geographic Blog

Katie Macqueen

4-5 minutes

In the days following Hurricane Irma, Florida has slowly started the cleanup process. Roads are cleared off, electricity is slowly making its way back into households, and trees are trimmed up.

However, for Florida wildlife, the cleanup process is a little more difficult… and the 2017 Hurricane Season isn’t over just yet.

Irma’s Impact on Florida’s Sea Turtles

With winds that exceeded 100 mph, Hurricane Irma turned A1a at Fort Lauderdale Beach into a sand trail and churned the ocean all the way up the Florida coastline. Pompano Diver James Gadomski reported 0-8 feet of visibility and strong currents in the days following Irma, and the wrecks she stirred up, especially The Rodeo.

The coastal Floridians know that right now is sea turtle season—the time of the year where we turn our lights down on the shore and erect bright tape boundaries around the sandy mountains of sea turtle eggs, carefully documenting and watching for the night when they make their first trek out into the big, wide world.

Now imagine these little hatchlings, no more than 3 in. long, facing the power of Hurricane force winds.

100+ mph winds.

6-12 ft. storm surges.

About Sea Turtles in Florida

Sea turtles in Florida nest from May to October. Every two to three years, a female sea turtle will make her way back to the shore of her birth and lay her own nest of 80-120 eggs, camouflaging them and burying them before making her way back to the open ocean.

After just two months, the entire nest of turtles will hatch and make their way to the waves. Unfortunately for the hatchlings, nesting season and hurricane season coincide, and Irma impacted these little guys in

a major way.

As Irma crashed across the state, hundreds of little Loggerheads and Green sea turtles that weren't able to make it to the safety of the Sargasso Sea were washed back ashore, pummeled by the surf and the sand. Floridians up and down the coast have reported hundreds of washbacks to the FWC, who are organizing the rehabilitation efforts.

How We Can Help

Brevard County Zoo and the Sea Turtle Preservation Society are heading up the efforts to safely and effectively rehabilitate the sea turtles and allow them plenty of rest before taking them out to the Sargasso Sea and releasing them back into the wild.

"Currently, we are evaluating their health, checking for injuries… Then we give them about 12-24 hours of rest, dry… and then we put them into tanks and allow them to swim," says Broward Zoo staff member Shannon. "FWC will actually arrange a boat ride out for these turtles. They are too tired to be swimming right now, they will not make it out from our coastline [on their own]."

Photo Credit: Brevard Zoo. Hatchling washbacks are given plenty of rest before moving them into these holding tanks, where they are carefully observed before being released into the wild.

Loggerhead sea turtles are listed as a threatened species, while Green sea turtles are listed as an endangered species by the federal Endangered Species Act.

What does this mean for sea turtles? They are in danger of going extinct, based on their current population rates. Floridians and ocean advocates everywhere are coming together to raise awareness and get these little guys back out to sea where they belong.

How You Can Help

The 2017 Hurricane Season has already impacted hundreds of sea turtles (and other marine wildlife) across the state. Considering their nesting season doesn't end until October, and more storm systems developing out in the Atlantic, please be on the lookout for washback sea turtles. Here's what you can do to help:

- If you're near the Florida coast, walk the shores and assess the damage. Tired turtles will continue to wash back to shore in the days (and potentially weeks) following large storm systems.
- If you see any wildlife in need of help, please contact the FWC immediately, as the Brevard Zoo and many other wildlife rehabilitation centers cannot accept wildlife from the public. FWC's number is 1-888-404-FWCC.
- *Please do not throw hatchlings, juveniles, or adult sea turtles back in the water. They need rest.*
- Picking up plastic bags, balloons, and other litter on the beach goes a long way.

For more information on sea turtles, visit FWC's website here.