

Turtle Experts Weigh Egg-hatching Plans

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3-4 minutes

MELBOURNE — Amateur turtle preservationists will compare the way they hatch sea turtle eggs with the state's more complicated program to see which produces the most baby turtles.

The Sea Turtle Preservation Society has been rescuing endangered sea turtles and their eggs and hatchlings along Brevard County beaches for several years, said society director Peter Bandre.

Last year the group incubated about 400 eggs from four nests with a "nearly 100 percent hatch rate," he said. After the turtles hatched, society members released them.

Bandre said the incubation technique he developed is so simple, it might have been overlooked by other turtle preservationists.

He puts a single layer of turtle eggs on sand in a clear plastic box, covers the eggs with more sand and covers the sand with a paper towel.

This inexpensive method ensures that all eggs get the same amount of heat and moisture, which means they will hatch at the same time and all the hatchlings will be about the same size, Bandre said.

In the Department of Natural Resources incubation method, layers of eggs are placed in an insulated box with a wire screen between each level of eggs, a department spokesman said.

Because moisture runs to the bottom and heat rises, the eggs hatch at different times and the hatchlings often vary in size.

Nevertheless, about two-thirds of the eggs being incubated by this method hatch successfully, he said.

This year, the society will use Bandre's method to incubate eggs from five turtle nests and the department's method to incubate eggs from five other nests. Hatching results will be compared at the end of the eight-week incubation period to see which is more effective.

After studying the results, environmentalists will pick the best method to help hatch the eggs from about 400,000 turtles left in the world.

The society will meet at 7 tonight at the Brevard Community College Wildlife and Nature Center at Wickham Road and Interstate 95 near Melbourne to tell people about the group's efforts.

Volunteers are needed to distribute information about turtles and to help develop a 24-hour turtle protection hot line.

People can use the hot line to report violations of the federal Endangered Species Act and notify the society about stranded turtles or endangered nests or eggs, Bandre said.

The society also is trying to raise money so it can open an information office in Indialantic and buy a three-wheeled all-terrain vehicle to patrol the beach for turtles, he said.

Society members are lobbying to expand throughout Brevard the county ordinance restricting night beach lighting in unincorporated areas during turtle nesting season. The season runs from May 31 through Oct. 31.

Because hatchlings instinctively use moonlight to lead them to the sea, artificial beach lighting confuses the baby turtles. Hatchlings often crawl toward beachfront lights, then become stranded and die or are eaten by birds or raccoons.