The History of the Sea Turtle Preservation Society

By Donna Braunlich

Early one summer morning in 1982, Peter Bandré stopped at the beach in Indialantic and saw 50-60 sea turtle hatchlings dead in the parking lot and more coming out of the trees. Cars were running over them. The hatchlings, which instinctively use light reflecting off the ocean to guide them to the water, instead were being lured by bright streetlights into the boardwalk parking lot.

The 24-year-old Bandré had just moved to Florida from the Philadelphia area and now worked as a contractor in Brevard County. Each morning he would stop at the beach in Indialantic for coffee on his way to work. He had grown up with a strong interest in reptiles, and his interest quickly expanded to Florida reptiles, from mostly snakes and alligators, to include sea turtles.

That morning really impacted Bandré, and he pledged to help the hatchlings. He could not find any environmentalists or agencies helping sea turtle hatchlings at the time. Bandré contacted the Department of Natural Resources, now the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and secured the required permitting to make his morning rescues legal.

Bandré recounted that the first year the efforts focused on rescuing hatchlings. The second year he and a small group started to document nest locations. The group soon could report on a correlation between lights and nest numbers: quiet, dark beaches were where the nests were most densely grouped. By the third year, interest in the plight of sea turtles was growing. The Brevard Sea Turtle Rescue and Release Program was officially founded. Dr. Joseph R. Cwikla, DMD, an endodontist in Indialantic, gave the group an office in his building to use for the summer. One of the nagging first issues of the organization was its unwieldy name, but that was quickly resolved when Bandré's wife suggested the Sea Turtle Preservation Society.

In 1986, after four years of doing what he and a small, dedicated group could, Bandré decided they needed to formally band together to help sea turtles in the area. STPS was incorporated as a Florida 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit corporation on May 6,1986. It should not be a surprise to learn that the first state permit holder, which included all activities requiring permits, was Peter Bandré.

The group's operations were much different than now. STPS kept tanks in the back of the Ryckman House office for turtles and had local vets on call to help with stranding and rehabilitation. Membership dues were $10 per year, and the total membership was 350.

Bandré left the organization in 1994 to pursue other ventures, and this amazing start was just the beginning for the Sea Turtle Preservation Society.

STPS Events and Programs Timeline

1982: In the first STPS stranding event, Peter Bandré and fellow surfers rescued disoriented hatchlings that had crawled over the dune at what is now the Indialantic Boardwalk toward lights in the area. Immediately following this event, Bandré secured the required state permits for rescuing stranded sea turtles.

1986: STPS was incorporated as a Florida 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit corporation on May 6, 1986.

1988: STPS made national news in its efforts to address beach lighting and its effect on sea turtles. *The Washington Post* published an article detailing when Allen H. Neuharth, president of *Florida Today*, was awakened by a Cocoa Beach police officer and two STPS members about the lights surrounding his oceanfront house.

1988: STPS obtained the required state permits and began to offer Turtle Night Walks during sea turtle nesting season to educate the public about sea turtles and their habitats.

1993: The Brevard Board of County Commissioners passed lighting restrictions that are in effect from May 1 through Oct. 31.

1996: The STPS nest survey program started after receiving the required permit from the state FWC. Volunteers monitored a two-mile stretch of beach in south Cocoa Beach for the first time during the summer nesting season, and the program continues today.

1996: STPS adopted Coconut Point Park as part of the Keep Brevard Beautiful Adopt-a-Shore program. The adoption was inspired by STPS nest survey teams that were collecting trash on the beach. STPS also has adopted Cherie Down Park through the KBB program.

2001: The Turtle Krawl began as a 10K Bike/Skate and 5K Run/Walk held in the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge in Melbourne Beach. The event was organized by Donna Lee Crawford, a county Parks and Recreation Department employee, and benefited STPS.

2001: Local artist James Michael Nemnich, known as Nemo, provided original artwork for the first Turtle Krawl and has contributed original artwork specifically for Turtle Krawl annually since that time.

2003: From Aug. 7-13, STPS volunteers along with community members in Brevard County rescued approximately 8,000 sea turtle hatchlings that were stunned by unusually cold surf water. The majority of collected hatchlings were released in St. Lucie County where the water temperature was higher. Less active hatchlings were taken offshore by boat and released off Volusia, Brevard, and Palm Beach counties.

2003: STPS relocated to 111 S. Miramar Avenue, Indialantic, FL, after 16 years of moving between various locations. The location has become known as the Turtle House gift shop and education center.

2007: STPS promoted a Lights Out Event to remind residents and inform visitors of the lights out ordinance. This event reached out to local businesses that had marquees along Hwy. A1A and asked them to put up a message to help remind people of the start of the lights out season.

2008: The Sea Turtle Emergency Response Program, known as STERP, was created. The program trains volunteers who assist during weather events that affect sea turtles, such as rescuing post-hatchlings washed ashore after storms.

2010: The Turtle Krawl 5K was resurrected as an STPS event after ending in 2008 when the original organizer changed jobs. The event was moved from Melbourne Beach to Indialantic.

2011: The Attention Boaters Program began as a direct response to the offshore boat races that were held during the sea turtle nesting season in Cocoa Beach, FL.

2014: STPS entered into a three-year partnership agreement with the Brevard Zoo to jointly develop a sea turtle medical facility that would provide care for injured and sick rescued turtles. As part of this agreement, STPS committed $25,000 a year to help fund operating costs. STPS continues to provide annual financial support to the facility.

2016: In the fall, STPS volunteers, with assistance from conservation-minded beachgoers, rescued 1,500 washback post-hatchling sea turtles that were pushed onto beaches from Cape Canaveral to south of Melbourne Beach due to two major weather events, Hurricane Matthew on Oct. 7 and a weather system that soon followed and created strong easterly winds. STPS volunteers transported these sea turtles to the Brevard Zoo's Sea Turtle Healing Center.

2017: STPS received a permit to provide training to stranding and salvage volunteers for transporting turtles safely to rehabilitation facilities. The STPS Transport Program was the first of its kind in Florida.

2018: In May 2018, STPS received a matching grant from the Sea Turtle Grants Program to assist in the purchase of a second vehicle for rescue operations. One vehicle continues to be based at the Turtle House in Indialantic while the second vehicle will be based at Port Canaveral.

2019: STPS volunteers provided training in response and rescue protocols to Port Authority personnel who frequently encounter injured sea turtles or other wildlife at the port. STPS was provided a storage unit at the port for sea turtle rescue equipment.

2019: STPS opened a second location, nicknamed the Turtle Nest kiosk, at Port Canaveral that offers sea turtle educational displays as well as merchandise for sale.