

Leave sea turtles alone after Isaias

Residents encouraged to call hotline if concerned for hatchlings

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After its egg broiled in the sun for hours atop the sand in Satellite Beach, a sluggish loggerhead sea turtle hatchling emerged from its Tropical Storm Isaiaswrecked nest.

The Indialantic-based Sea Turtle Preservation Society responded to the exposed nest about 12:30 p.m. Monday, near the Cassia Boulevard dune crossover in Satellite Beach.

The group retrieved nine struggling hatchlings, most of whom remained stuck inside their eggs. The lethargic baby laboring to reach the sea was still attached to its egg — meaning it wouldn't have survived, STPS board chair Susan Skinner said.

The tiny endangered reptiles were carefully transported to the Brevard Zoo Sea Turtle Healing Center in Viera for rehabilitation.

Along the Space Coast, Isaias' waves unearthed untold numbers of eggs and hatchlings during a peak time for turtle nesting. But Florida wildlife officials urge those who come across exposed turtle eggs or stranded baby turtles to not collect them.

"We ask people not to touch hatchlings, but to call our hotline at 321-206-0646 because sea turtles are a protected species through state and federal law," said Skinner, who responded to the Satellite Beach ruined nest.

"They're endangered. So no one can touch them. We have trained and authorized personnel that can respond to you and help you with any situation," Skinner said.

Federal and state laws protect sea turtles and forbid taking, possessing, disturbing, mutilating, destroying, selling and harassing all types of sea turtles, their nests and their eggs.

Some researchers and turtle advocacy groups obtain special permits to handle turtle eggs and to rehabilitate stranded turtles.

Beachgoers aren't supposed to touch sea turtles, including recent hatchlings trying to reach the ocean after storms.

"Another thing that we found a lot of people doing is, they'll see a hatchling and they'll take it down to the waterline. If it is a turtle that has

washed back in, it's not going to have the strength to swim,' Skinner said.

'So once again, just please leave it and call us,' she said.

Monday afternoon, Brevard Zoo officials announced that they were caring for 42 sea turtle hatchlings in the aftermath of Isaias.

'Unfortunately, about half of them are perfectly healthy sea turtles brought directly to the Zoo or Sea Turtle Preservation Society (STPS) by well-meaning individuals,' zoo officials wrote in a blog post.

The five species of sea turtle that nest in Florida have evolved to live with fierce storms, biologists say, and is the reason they lay multiple nests per year.

'This year's sea turtle nesting season is already a success, and the storm season will not change that fact,' the STPS posted on its website. 'Thousands of nests already have successfully emerged and those hatchlings are now in the ocean; after the storm, mama turtles will continue to nest on our beaches as they complete their nesting season.'

The organization urges people to leave any exposed eggs and nests on the beach.

'You may cover an exposed nest with sand, but do not attempt to salvage eggs or move them to another site,' the STPS website says.

Beachgoers also should not search the seaweed wrack line for hatchling or washed-back turtles,' the group says. STPS and other groups have authorized and trained individuals who will survey the beaches as needed.

Sea turtles have been on earth for more than 110 million years and were swimming in the oceans when dinosaurs were still around, STPS notes. 'To have survived this long, sea turtles and their nesting strategies must be well adapted to hurricanes and their effects.'

A nesting loggerhead turtle will typically nest three to six times each nesting season, with each effort a few weeks apart, biologists say, choosing different spans of beach and different placements on the beach.

'Wildlife has specific mechanisms to defend themselves against different types of weather, generally without the assistance of people,' the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said in a prepared statement. 'The best way that people can stay safe and help wildlife is to be alert and give wildlife their space.'

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Sea Turtle Preservation Society board chair Susan Skinner carefully handles loggerhead sea turtle hatchlings and eggs Monday afternoon from a Satellite Beach nest that was wrecked by Tropical Storm Isaias.

RICK NEALE/FLORIDA TODAY