

One in a thousand survive

Turtles face treacherous journey

Loggerhead sea turtles begin crawling ashore to nest in May and continue nesting through late August. Hatching continues from August through October.

On Oak Island and Bald Head Island last nesting season, a total of 174 nests, 20,696 eggs and 16,556 hatchlings were reported.

Of those hatchlings, however, only 16 are expected to survive to maturity. Predators and boats are a common cause of injury and death for sea turtles, and pollution is posing an increasing threat, said Long Beach Turtle Watch coordinator Tina Pritchard.

"Everytime a nesting female is lost, you potentially lose ten thousand hatchlings that may have been laid over a sea turtle's approximately 50-year life span," she said.

This is particularly bad news for sea turtles because only one in 1,000 hatchlings is expected to survive to adulthood, Pritchard explained. Once in the water, most hatchlings fall victim to predators and pollution.

Necropsies of three dead turtles that washed ashore in the area last

year indicated that all of them had ingested plastic, she added.

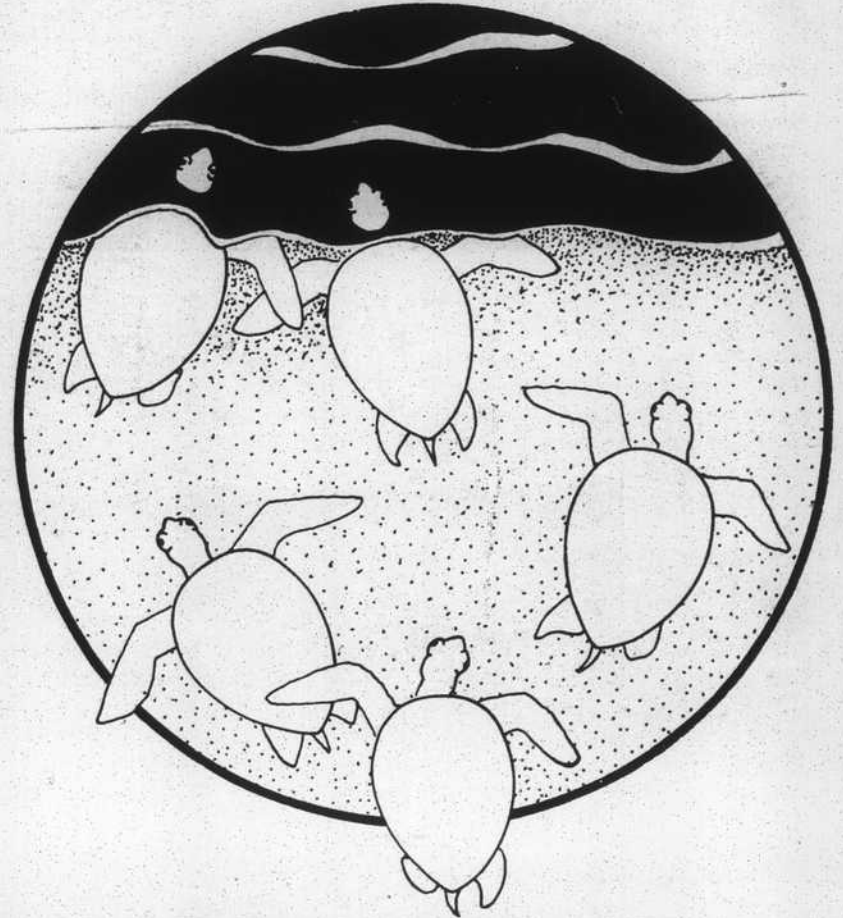

In Long Beach this year, a stray dog destroyed nine nests of eggs and one nest of hatchlings. Pritchard and other volunteers tried unsuccessfully to trap the dog but were not able to catch the canine in the act.

Despite the threat to eggs and hatchlings, Pritchard said the Turtle Watch program has dramatically increased the number of hatchlings released each year. But because it takes 20 to 30 years for a loggerhead to reach sexual maturity, she said it may be decades before the results of Turtle Watch programs are seen.

"I know this has to be making a difference, but it might not happen until after we're gone," she said.

During nesting season, residents and visitors are asked to be on the lookout for sea turtles crossing Beach Drive at night. Several have been killed there in recent years.

Anyone who sees a sea turtle is asked to immediately notify the Long Beach Police Department, 278-5595.

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