

Island Patrols Always Save Their Turtles

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

It was the early morning watch out of homicide. Elga Goodman and Ann King were on 6:30 a.m. patrol from Island Plaza headquarters on Ocean Isle Beach. I joined them for the first patrol of the day, a half-mile in each direction up and down the beach.

Our mission: observe tracks of the sea turtle and find her nest. By 8:30 a.m. the patrol was terminated, with no tracks spotted, no nests discovered.

This highly disciplined effort to avert further deaths of the sea creatures would win the approval of Sgt. Friday or any other law enforcement agency. In official-looking T-shirts proclaiming "Turtle Patrol, Ocean Isle Beach," and sporting a turtle logo, about 30 residents of this little island take turns walking the strand during the nesting season for loggerhead and leatherback turtles, hoping to spot their tracks toward a nesting location and then to discover the deep nests housing perhaps 100 fragile eggs.

A muggy but cool breeze made the walk pleasant on this early June day, but it was a fruitless search and my two companions were especially disappointed because their counterparts on Holden Beach had already found a nest, as had others on Sunset Beach. Long Beach patrolers held the lead so far, with four nests spotted.

"We're all pretty competitive about this," Goodman laughed, "but I think everyone is mostly concerned about saving these turtles. The loggerhead and leatherback are almost extinct."

She pressed on me an armful of educational literature, including a newsletter from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, a reprint of an article, "The Troubled Turtle," a colorbook intended for school children and bright orange posters alerting island vacationers to the importance of caution during the creatures' nesting season.

All this concern is fairly recent on the Brunswick beaches, although during the 1980s the plight

responsibility of patrolling the beaches daily, beginning in May. When nests are found, they often must be moved from dangerous locations in front of accessways and only state-permitted people are allowed to move them. There are two permitted "movers" on each beach.

"My husband asked me, 'What did these turtles do before you folks came along?' " King joked. "It's a good question, and the answer is that the beaches were much safer for them many years ago, with not so many people and dogs and vehicles, not so many lights."

Turtles are very sensitive to bright lights, which can turn the mothers back toward the sea, leaving their unique tracks behind. Fishing waters hold dangers for them as more and more trawlers seine the waters, but recent legislation has required the installation of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) to forestall this problem.

"People living and visiting here have been really cooperative about turning off their outside lights," Goodman observed. "In fact, many people are so interested in this, they gather around nests when we find one and will sit and watch with us. It's a kind of party." Turtle patrolers guard nests during the 50-to-85-day gestation period, then watch tiny hatchlings emerge from the sand pit and make their way to safety in the waters. These human friends often guide them in the right direction with flashlights; otherwise many would wander toward the dunes and be destroyed by other wildlife or under foot of vacationers.

"We were all reminded of the importance of this work a couple of weeks ago," Goodman related, "when a big leatherback, about 80 by 56 inches, was washed up on Ocean Isle. It had been massacred by a ship's motor and was already dead."

Leatherbacks are much larger than the other sea turtles, weighing up to 1,500 pounds and measuring as long as eight feet. They can live up to 150 years if they survive the rigors of modern human development. In addition to accidental deaths, they are hunted down for their leathery skin and this has been the chief factor in their near-extinction.

Smaller loggerheads and green sea turtles are only 300 to 400 pounds and 3 to 6 feet in length. All feed on jellyfish and crabs, all nest from May to August, and all are vulnerable to fishing nets, poaching and a loss of habitat in which to lay their eggs.

If Brunswick Islanders have their way, though, these creatures will get a new lease on life. While Long Beach patroler Becky Marksberg said insufficient time has elapsed to determine the effectiveness of turtle patrols, she added, "It must be helping some."

Anyone wishing to join the ranks of turtle protection can call her at 270-4821 or Ann King at 579-9202.



PHOTO BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

ELGA GOODMAN, left and Ann King, enjoy their early-morning patrol along the Ocean Isle Beach strand, alert to possible turtle nests or tracks.

of sea turtles became apparent to environmentalists and animal preservationists. Fishing boats had inadvertently captured great numbers of turtles along with their seafood "catch," and increased development on beaches had caused nests to be destroyed and nestlings to die prematurely.

Five years ago, Tina Pritchard, then an employee of Brunswick County's Parks and Recreation

Department, organized turtle watch groups on all county beaches, educated them on the subject and trained them to help preserve the species. She is now state coordinator for the "turtle protection program."

Some 25 to 30 people in each of these communities became volunteer patrolers, eager to help turtle nestlings find their way safely from nest to sea. They take seriously the

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