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“Lights Out for sea turtles!”

TI Residents Help Nesting Turtles by Following Ban on Night Lighting

With the official start of turtle nesting season May 1, residents and property owners of beachfront properties are reminded it’s time for “Lights Out” along the beachfront. Treasure Island has an ordinance in place prohibiting lighting that casts glare onto the beach. During turtle nesting season, May 1 to Nov. 1, residents are encouraged to be environmentally responsible and turn the “Lights Out” after 9 p.m.

Each May, the Clearwater Marine Aquarium conducts a lighting survey to determine compliance with the turtle protection ordinances. Properties with lights shining on the beach at night are reported to Pinellas County Environmental Management Department and the local code enforcement agency.

The reason that the beach must be in darkness is twofold. First, when the female loggerhead makes her nest, direct lighting can disorientate her, making her attempt to nest unsuccessful. Second, once the hatchlings do emerge, in 50 to 60 days, they instinctively follow the light of the moon reflecting off the gulf back to the water. If there are lights shining on the east side, they follow that light to inevitable tragedy.

Florida’s beaches are essential for nesting loggerheads. According to Dr. Nicole Elko, coastal coordinator for Pinellas County Environmental Management, the number of turtle nests was at a drastic low last season, with 38 nests monitored by the Clearwater Marine Aquarium. The county contracts with CMA to track and monitor the turtles nests from Clearwater Beach to St. Pete Beach. Dr. Elko said that Pinellas County usually tracks an average of 100 nests during one season, with 200 nests possible.

“Even though turtle nesting season starts May 1, we have been out patrolling the beaches every morning since April 1,” said Mike Anderson, the new director of sea turtle nesting at CMA. “We are hopeful to have more turtle nests this year.”

In addition to checking the beaches every morning for signs of nests, CMA marks the nests and accounts for false crawls – times when the female that comes ashore does not complete her nest. Successful nests are roped off to avoid human disturbance. As an endangered species, federal law protects loggerhead turtles and bothering their nests is illegal. The nests are caged and volunteers watch the site at night to alert officials when the hatchlings emerge.

By obeying the law and following some simple guidelines, residents and visitors can greatly improve the chances of sea turtle survival, while being given the opportunity to experience first-hand the wonder of their life cycle.

To report sea turtle activity, call the Clearwater Marina Aquarium at (727) 441-1790, ext. 224.