

VELADOR

Science-Based Sea Turtle Conservation Since 1959

Issue 2, 2024

Legislative Session Brings Positive Outcomes for Sea Turtles



A nesting green turtle in the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. Photo credit: Chuck Palmer.

The 2024 Florida Legislative Session took place from January 9 to March 8. During that time, Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC), with critical help from our supporters, legislators, and partner environmental organizations, defeated problematic legislation and championed policies that will protect sea turtles. STC conducted outreach around several bills filed during the Session that could

have impacted Florida's sea turtles and habitats. One of the most pressing was **S.B. 1126/H.B. 1641 – Regulation of Auxiliary Containers**, a bill that would have prevented all local governments in Florida from regulating any type of single-use container. This would have included single-use plastic, glass, polystyrene (commonly known as Styrofoam), and other materials. These regulations

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Inside: STC Receives Grant from Sea Turtle Grants Program



Lighting Team Takes Trip to Aruba to Share Expertise



... from cover

already exist in more than 20 local governments and state parks, and directly prevent trash from polluting our waterways and harming wildlife.

The bill gained traction quickly. Once the bill was approved in its first House and Senate committee stops, STC and the environmental community rallied together to garner opposition. STC sent several action alerts through social media, our website, and our e-newsletter urging our followers to contact committee members to vote “no” on the bill. On February 6, when the Senate version was scheduled to be heard in the Community

Affairs Committee, STC Policy Coordinator Stacey Gallagher and Membership Coordinator Evan Cooper traveled to the Capitol in Tallahassee to speak against the bill. Representatives from the Florida Springs Council, the Surfrider Foundation, Ocean Conservancy, and additional north Florida springs groups also traveled to speak at the meeting. However, once we sat down in the meeting, the chair announced that the bill was “temporarily postponed.” Because the committee was not scheduled to meet again for the rest of the Session, the Senate version of the bill was effectively dead. We believe that this positive development would not have occurred without the strong level of opposition waged by our partners and supporters.

Unfortunately, the following week, the House version of the bill was scheduled to be heard in the State Affairs Committee. STC and its partners again contacted legislators to educate them about the potential harms of this bill and urged our followers to do the same through action alerts. Luckily, the same result occurred in this meeting as the Senate version – the bill was temporarily postponed by the sponsor as soon as the meeting began. With this action, S.B. 1126/H.B. 1641 – Regulation of Auxiliary Containers was defeated, and local ability to regulate single-use containers was preserved!

Another concerning bill that STC and its partners advocated against was **S.B. 738/H.B. 789 - Environmental Management**. If passed in its original form, the bill would have required Florida citizens or nonprofits to pay the attorney fees for the prevailing party if they challenged a State environmental decision and lost. The bill also called for the State’s Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) and water management



VELADOR {bel.a.dor}

In Caribbean cultures, **Velador** translates as “one who stands vigil” —referring to turtle hunters who waited at night for turtles to come ashore. STC claims this title for its newsletter, and around the world STC’s researchers and volunteers are replacing poachers as the new veladors. The **Velador** is published for Members and supporters of the nonprofit **Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC)**. STC is dedicated to the conservation of sea turtles through research, advocacy, education and protection of the habitats upon which they depend.

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districts to conduct a “holistic review” of their coastal permitting processes and permit programs in order to “increase efficiency” within each program. Although “efficiency” in government permitting programs seems like it would be a good thing, used in this context, “efficiency” could have meant reducing important checks and balances in place to protect Florida’s natural resources, including our beaches and waterways. Currently, state regulations are in place that dictate the timing, location, and type of coastal construction that can be completed on Florida’s beaches to ensure that it does not harm federally-protected sea turtles and their habitat.

If this bill were to have passed as written, these important barriers could have been weakened, leading to further improper development on Florida’s beaches and putting our sea turtles and largest economic driver at risk. STC is happy to share that with strong advocacy by our followers who responded to our action alerts and our partners, the harmful sections in the bill containing the fee-shifting provision and the “holistic review” of permitting processes were taken out of the bill through amendments!

Similar to the previous bill, ***S.B. 298/H.B. 1079 – Local Government Coastal Protections*** would have taken away local governments’ ability to regulate building in coastal high hazard zones to the State. It also would’ve invalidated existing coastal building regulations. Luckily, the House version of this bill did not move forward and the Senate version was amended to remove the harmful provisions regarding coastal high hazard building regulations.

Finally, STC advocated for the passage of ***S.B. 602/H.B. 321 – Release of Balloons***. Balloon releases are still common to celebrate events or memorialize loved ones. But when a balloon bursts and lands in the ocean, sea turtles and other marine wildlife often consume it because of its resemblance to jellyfish. Sea turtles are unable to regurgitate, so once the balloon enters the digestive tract, it can cause an impaction that can lead to death. As Florida Statute currently reads, residents can release up to ten balloons per day, with an exception for biodegradable balloons, which is not scientifically sound. This bill closed this unfortunate loophole and re-classified

balloons as litter, which triggered a \$150 fine penalty for citizens who released them.



After the bill was filed, it received near-unanimous support in all of its committees and in the full House and Senate. STC, in collaboration with our partner organizations, informed various audiences about the importance of the bill’s passage and advocated for its approval. As of May 13, the bill has been approved by the Legislature and awaits Governor DeSantis’ approval. STC sent a letter to the Governor urging him to sign it into law; we are hopeful that he will sign it to protect Florida’s beaches and wildlife from harmful balloon litter.

Although STC was largely defending against problematic policies this Session, nearly all of our priority bills received the outcome we were aiming for. This was only possible through our close partnership with the Florida environmental community, direct communication with legislators, and public-facing outreach. We are so grateful to our large network of dedicated sea turtle supporters who spent time learning about these issues and wrote emails, made phone calls, or shared about these bills on social media. Your advocacy and passion for Florida’s sea turtles made an enormous difference during the 2024 Legislative Session!

However, our work is not done. Florida’s sea turtles continue to face threats from climate change, problematic lighting, plastic pollution, poor water quality, and more. These issues will certainly come up during the 2025 Legislative Session and we will make sure to inform you about these policies and how you can help us advocate for sea turtle protection.

 **By Stacey Gallagher**
Development & Policy Coordinator

Sea Turtle Conservancy Action Ambassadors Launches in the Archie Carr Refuge

With support from Florida's Sea Turtle Grants Program, the Sea Turtle Academy (STA) field study education programs at the Barrier Island Center in the Archie Carr Refuge have reached up to 3,300 students in both Brevard and Indian River Counties. The popular STA program mostly reaches K-4th graders. In 2019, STC and our partners built the summer Sea Turtle TECH STEM Mentorship Program to reach diverse, underserved middle school and teen audiences filling a gap in our programming. In 2022, BIC also launched a new STA STEM Outreach program to provide opportunities for the STA attendees to be empowered to innovate solutions to sea turtle threats. All of these programs show strong learning outcomes and shifts in pro-sea turtle attitudes and conservation minded behaviors. However, the BIC still needed a year round program to reach youth and teens during the school year. This year, STC is expanding the reach of our Carr Refuge education programs with a new Sea Turtle Grants Program grant that will increase STC's capacity to train future stewards of the Carr Refuge.



The Inspiring Sea Turtle Conservancy Action Ambassadors (STCAA) grant was awarded for \$20,955 for 2024. This grant is supporting bus scholarships for Title 1, K-4th grade school children to attend the STA program at the BIC, to participate in the STA STEM Outreach program, and to support the Community Stewardship Coordinator and an STC intern for nine months to



As part of the new STC Action Ambassadors, local youth and teens will gain hands-on experience in the stewardship and advocacy skills necessary to protect the Carr Refuge.

help with education, outreach and the launch of a new Sea Turtle Conservancy Action Ambassadors (STCAA) program. For the STCAA, STC will recruit 10 students ages 11-18, from Carr Refuge area schools, including homeschools. The program consists of a minimum of eight monthly meetings from October through May. This program is modeled on the Community Action Projects for the Environment (CAPE) process honed by the University of Florida. This model leads to effective change in communities because the students select their project on a local issue, take ownership of the research and discussion, design a plan of action and advocate for change. The action projects can be citizen science, stewardship or advocacy focused and will address sea turtle conservation issues in the Carr Refuge. Students will improve their knowledge of the issues facing sea turtles, civic literacy and governance skills, self-efficacy and collective efficacy.

By offering year-round opportunities for sea turtle STEM education and civic action to diverse ages and backgrounds, STC will continue to train the future leaders of the sea turtle conservation movement in both the science and advocacy skills necessary to sustain our globally significant population of nesting sea turtles on the Archie Carr Refuge. 🐢

By Sarah Rhodes-Ondi
Community Stewardship Coordinator
Barrier Island Center

Lighting Program Update

STC Lighting Team Shares Expertise in Aruba

While most commonly recognized as a vacation destination, the small island of Aruba, located off the coast of Venezuela, hosts nesting beaches frequented by leatherback, loggerhead, green, and hawksbill sea turtles. The western side of the island supports sandy beaches that turtles and tourists enjoy, and along with them, problematic lights.

For more than 20 years, the TurtugAruba Foundation has served as the sole sea turtle monitoring and protection organization on the island. Because the level of disorientation is so high on their beaches – due to street lights and unshielded, short wavelength lights from coastal properties – representatives from the organization have developed barricades to rescue hatchlings as they emerge from their nests to ensure that they make it to sea safely. Recognizing that this intervention is not a sustainable solution, representatives from the organization contacted Sea Turtle Conservancy's (STC) lighting team in late 2023 for assistance.



STC walked Aruba's beaches to get a better sense of the challenges they face and their lighting needs. Problematic lights, such as lights on this beachfront restaurant, were common in high tourism areas of the island.

In January, STC Lighting Project Manager Rachel Tighe and Senior Lighting Project Specialist Emily Wooley traveled to Aruba to share the team's lighting expertise with a variety of stakeholders on the island. Rachel and Emily met with TurtugAruba representatives and walked the island's most prominent nesting beach to fully understand the scope of the problem. On January 23, Rachel

hosted a presentation about why coastal lighting is a threat to sea turtles and how it can be addressed to government and utility company representatives. Rachel shared how communities in Florida have transitioned their coastal streetlights to wildlife friendly alternatives to illustrate that it can be replicated in Aruba.



STC Lighting Project Manager Rachel Tighe and Senior Lighting Project Specialist Emily Wooley with representatives from the TortugAruba Foundation in Eagle Beach, Aruba.

After the presentation, Rachel and Emily conducted a lighting evaluation at a beachfront restaurant and hotel. The TurtugAruba Foundation and the hotel manager took part in the evaluation and learned about possible lighting solutions for priority areas on the property. At night, Rachel and Emily visited a neighboring beach which is a prominent tourist destination, to view resorts with problematic lighting and learn more about common lighting needs in the area.

Rachel and Emily also met with the Aruba Prime Minister's aide to discuss the country's draft "Rights of Nature" document and how potential language could be included to manage problematic lighting. Because the island is only 30 square kilometers, they also suggested including Dark Sky principles in the document, which focus on managing inland light pollution through shielding. Adopting these principles could be effective in reducing sea turtle disorientations by reducing skyglow.

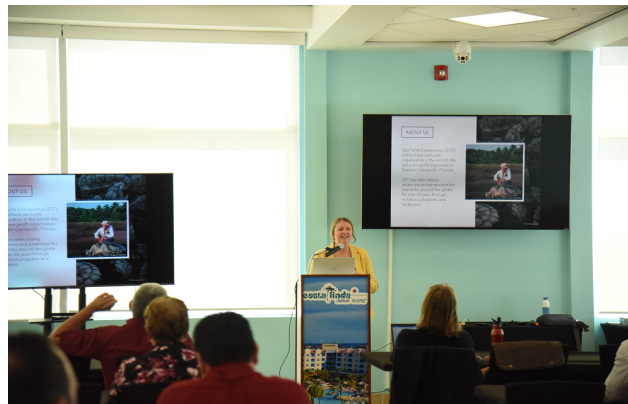
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“Everyone we met with seemed receptive to change,” Rachel said. “While we hope citizens would make the change to wildlife friendly lighting on their own, having lighting requirements within legislation is incredibly important and is often the jump-start a community needs to begin the shift to being more conservation-minded.”

On January 24, Emily hosted a presentation on wildlife friendly lighting solutions for hotel managers and members of a timeshare association, where 40 people were in attendance. That evening, Rachel and Emily took additional nighttime photos of problematic streetlights and met with a coastal restaurant owner to discuss wildlife friendly lighting solutions.

“During our visit, every local we met was incredibly accommodating and kind,” Rachel said. “We are grateful for the opportunity, and while we were able to share our knowledge with TurtugAruba and other entities during their visit, we learned so much from our hosts and it really felt like ‘One Happy Island,’” Rachel said, referencing Aruba’s motto.

Since Rachel and Emily visited the island, the



Senior Lighting Project Specialist Emily Wooley presents to hotel managers and members of the Aruba Timeshare Association about wildlife friendly lighting solutions.

TurtugAruba Foundation has hosted additional wildlife lighting presentations for resort representatives and hosted a training specifically on coastal lighting for their sea turtle volunteers. Rachel and Emily created a personalized lighting plan for a coastal hotel and provided resources on how to purchase wildlife friendly products. The Aruba government’s Director of Nature and Environment also created a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) regarding lighting that could be included in the Rights of Nature document; the SOP is currently available

for the public to review.

“We are excited that the information we shared during this trip resonated with the community and that they are working to put these practices into action,” Emily said. “It gives us hope that if other areas, like Aruba, are receptive to mitigating their problematic lights, we can help contribute to improved nesting habitats across a larger geographic scale.” 🌿

By Stacey Gallagher
Development & Policy Coordinator

Panama Update

STC’s Ari Ugüenrien Project Invited to IUCN Regional Conservation Forum in Mexico

In 2021, alongside 15 Ngäbe indigenous women from the Río Caña community, Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC) initiated the Ari Ugüenrien Project (which means “let’s cook together” in the Ngäbe language), a gastronomic movement to preserve culture through cuisine, with a commitment to nature. The project was inspired by Mario Castrellón, an influential Panamanian chef, and the efforts of these women and their children, who have begun working on sea turtle conservation in collaboration with STC. In April, the

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Panama Update continued...

project was selected by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to be featured at the Regional Conservation Forum in Mexico City.

The Forum aimed to pursue multiple objectives encompassing research, community participation, and promotion, all aimed at creating a harmonious balance between human activity and the natural world. The organizers of the event recognized STC's project as an effort that positively impacts indigenous peoples, addresses biodiversity loss and local needs, and promotes youth leadership. In a presentation at the event, STC's Panama Indigenous Communities Liaison Felipe Baker discussed the complexities of the project, driven entirely by indigenous people, and represented Panama and STC on a prestigious international platform.

The Ari Ugüenrien project is a testament to the commitment of the Rio Caña community to environmental conservation, particularly in the fields of gastronomy and culture. While presenting about the project, Felipe felt an immense sense of pride and responsibility, as well as a profound obligation to convey the rich biodiversity and environmental heritage that Panama embodies, as well as through networks and media, directing the focus of participants to showcase Panama's dedication to conservation.

Collaboration with STC added a layer of depth and importance to the project's community efforts. By aligning its work with an organization recognized for its experience and impact in marine turtle conservation, we were able to expand our reach and influence. Together, we shared best practices, exchanged innovative ideas, and forged partnerships that transcend borders, all towards a shared vision of a world where sea turtles thrive in their natural habitats in relation to local communities.

Felipe's trip to Mexico, facilitated by the IUCN, was a transformative experience that deepened our understanding of global conservation efforts, as well as an opportunity to inform regional IUCN members about our contribution to nature through the Ari Ugüenrien project and collaboration with STC. Felipe witnessed the power of collective action to safeguard the precious biodiversity of our planet. Upon returning home, he carried not only memories of an extraordinary journey but also a renewed



STC's Felipe Baker presents to IUCN Forum attendees about the Ari Ugüenrien Project and its impact on the conservation community.

sense of purpose and determination to continue advocating for the protection of our natural world. 🌍

Photo caption: IUCN Regional Conservation Forum attendees pose in front of the Tlaloc Fountain in Chapultepec Forest, Mexico City, where the conference took place.



By Felipe Baker
STC Panama Indigenous Community Liaison
Ari Ugüenrien Project Co-Founder



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12th Annual Tee Off for Turtles

On March 9, the 12th annual Tee Off for Turtles golf outing in the heart of the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge in Melbourne Beach, Florida raised awareness with 112 participants from local communities and more than \$12,000 for sea turtle conservation and education. Our Grand Sponsor for 2024 was our partner, Conservancy Friends of Aquarina (CFA), a legacy non-profit that advocates for education, conservation, restoration and preservation in Melbourne Beach, Fla. CFA has also supported college interns in STC's Conservation Career Training Program at the Barrier Island Center for both summer 2023 and 2024. STC thanks our 26 sponsors and donors, and 20 volunteers for making this event a success. Special thanks to Renata Sutton and Helen Stamatacos, STC Board Member, for assistance with the recruitment of sponsors and donors. We are also grateful to Aquarina Golf Manager, Ed Moseley and his family and staff who made the day run smoothly and helped us reach our goals!

