

VELADOR

Science-Based Sea Turtle Conservation Since 1959

Issue 1, 2026

Florida's Legislative Session Brings Challenges, Positive Outcomes for Sea Turtles



A green turtle returns to the Atlantic Ocean after nesting in the Archie Carr Refuge. Photo credit: Betty Gonzalez.

The 2026 Florida Legislative Session takes place from January 13 to March 13. Every Session, Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC), with critical help from our supporters, legislators, and partner environmental organizations, works to defeat problematic legislation and champion policies that will protect sea turtles. Our legislative priorities are focused on reducing the many threats that Florida's sea turtles face, including: climate change and sea level rise, risky coastal development,

plastic pollution, and degraded water quality and associated impacts to sea turtle food sources. We have described a few of our priority bills here.

STC supports the passage of SB 240/HB 575: Auxiliary Containers

Although local communities have not been able to regulate plastic bags in Florida since 2008 due to state preemption, local governments still have the

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Inside: Big Bend Education Initiative



Restoring Seagrass in the Indian River Lagoon

... from cover



A sea turtle hatchling gets stuck in a piece of plastic debris on the beach. Photo credit: Ralph Pace.

ability to regulate other single-use “auxiliary containers.” “Auxiliary containers” are defined as any single-use item made of plastic, foam, or other material that are used for transporting, consuming, or protecting merchandise, food, or beverages. For years, STC and its partners have fought industry-backed legislation which has aimed to eliminate this “patchwork” of trash regulation across the State. Instead of proposing a statewide solution to the single-use plastic and foam crisis, the Legislature has simply tried to prohibit bans on these items altogether and remove the local regulations currently in place. In 2026, HB 629: Regulation of Auxiliary Containers echoes previous preemption bills. Luckily, this bill has not moved.

However, a good bill was filed this Session that aims to proactively address marine debris and stop future preemption bills. SB 240/HB 575: Auxiliary Containers aims to make various changes to the current state of auxiliary container regulation throughout the State. While it does shift authority of regulating auxiliary containers to the State, it also preserves existing local laws, bans the sale and use of auxiliary containers in State Parks, and requires the Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) to create a uniform ordinance that can be adopted by local governments, as well as a Marine Debris Reduction Plan.

This bill protects the vital, specific laws that cities and counties have in place for their unique plastic reduction needs while understanding that a statewide, unified effort needs to be made to combat Florida’s marine pollution. Further, by prohibiting the sale or distribution of these items on lands managed by the Division of Recreation and Parks of FDEP, SB 240/ HB 575 will prevent trash from entering Florida’s State Parks, 53 of which are coastal.

On November 18, 2025, SB 240 passed unanimously in its first committee stop, the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee. HB 575 has not moved through any committees. We are hopeful that SB 240 will continue to move through the Legislature.

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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Sea Turtle Lighting Specialist
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Sea Turtle Lighting Specialist
Julia White

Sea Turtle Lighting Specialist
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Costa Rica Office Assistant
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Panama Education & Outreach Coordinator
Felipe J. Baker P.

STC supports the passage of SB 840: Land Use Regulations for Local Governments Affected by Natural Disasters

On June 26, 2025, Governor Ron DeSantis signed SB 180: Emergencies into law. This bill originally focused on local governments' ability to rebuild after disasters, but it has led to numerous unintended consequences by restricting local governments' ability to adopt stronger land-use and development rules. Many of the most important protections for sea turtles – such as restrictions on coastal construction, beachfront lighting ordinances, dune protection rules, and development setbacks – are created and enforced at the local level. Under this law, cities and counties are blocked from strengthening these protections if they are considered “more restrictive or burdensome” than existing development plans.

This Session, SB 840 was filed, which aims to walk back these harmful provisions that are negatively impacting sea turtles and their habitats. SB 840 revises circumstances under which impacted local governments may enforce certain amendments, site plans, development permits, or orders, and deletes provisions related to filing suit against an impacted local government for injunctive relief.

SB 840 has been approved through each of its committee stops and was approved by the full Senate on February 19.



Florida's State Capitol in Tallahassee.



Lighting ordinances are adopted and enforced at the local level in Florida. HB 105 could have impacted these important regulations.

STC is no longer concerned about HB 105: Local Government Enforcement Actions due to amendments.

When HB 105 was filed in October 2025, STC was extremely concerned about its potential impact on local sea turtle protections. The original language suggested it could weaken local enforcement actions by creating legal and financial risks that would lead to a regulatory chill, in which governments avoid enforcing a law to avoid lawsuits. We were particularly worried that cities and counties enforcing coastal lighting ordinances to protect sea turtles could be challenged by developers or businesses as “arbitrary or unreasonable,” especially if enforcement delayed construction or increased costs. This raised the possibility that local governments might avoid strict enforcement to prevent lawsuits.

However, as the bill moved through committees, the bill sponsor filed an amendment that explicitly protected enforcement actions that are authorized by local ordinances. This change addressed our concerns by affirming that properly adopted local lighting ordinances remain valid and enforceable. With that clarification, the risk of unintended consequences to sea turtle lighting protections has been resolved.

We are thankful to our members and supporters for staying informed and taking part in our action alerts. **To stay up to date on our policy priorities, follow STC's social media channels and visit** www.conserveturtles.org/program/stc-programs-policy-initiatives 

STC launches Big Bend Education Initiative on Florida's Gulf Coast

For decades, Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC) has provided accurate, user-friendly educational resources and programming to teachers and students around Florida and the United States. In 2025, STC received a grant from the Sea Turtle Grants Program to launch a targeted educational outreach program in Florida's Big Bend, which dovetails with STC's ongoing In-water Research Project studying turtle populations in the region.

The Big Bend consists of eight counties on Florida's Gulf Coast, spanning 220 miles from the Panhandle to just north of Tampa, and includes towns like Crystal River, Weeki Wachee, Keaton Beach, Steinhatchee, and Cedar Key. This area provides developmental habitat to large populations of sea turtles; however, these coastal communities have had very little access to educational programming regarding sea turtles and threats to their survival. This new program, the Big Bend Education Initiative (BBEI), has had a successful first year in bridging that knowledge gap and informing locals about the sea turtles and issues right in their backyards.



Evan Cooper at the Open House Presentation in Cedar Key, Florida.



Evan Cooper presenting to elementary school students in Steinhatchee, Florida.

In its first year, the BBEI reached people of all ages in five out of the eight counties in Florida's Big Bend, presenting at 20 classrooms across elementary, middle, and high schools in Citrus, Jefferson, and Taylor counties, as well as four fishing and environmental clubs in Hernando, Alachua, and Levy counties. The program also hosted an open house presentation at the Cedar Key Library, with a large turnout of close to 100 people, consisting of local businesses, community members, and out-of-town guests. From September 2025 to March 2026, the BBEI educated more than 1,000 students, parents, fishermen, conservationists, and others on sea turtles in Florida's Big Bend.

Evan Cooper, STC Membership and BBEI Coordinator, communicated issues related to sea turtles and marine conservation that are persistent in the area, including: impacts from recreational fishing (both shore- and land-based), boating interactions, water quality, fibropapillomatosis, and plastic pollution. After presentations, STC keeps the audience members engaged with brochures highlighting the STC In-water Sighting App, a free way that people can get involved through citizen science, as well as for STC to provide updates about their on-going in-water research in the area.

With almost 10 years of research experience in the Big Bend, STC has become an expert and leader in sea turtle conservation in the area. This new initiative has allowed us to pass on this knowledge to community members and students so they can advocate for sea turtles now and into the future. A goal of this program has been to inspire proactive actions that benefit sea turtles right where they live. By educating locals about human impacts on sea turtles and providing them with solutions to reduce threats, the BBEI will improve the chances of survival for sea turtles in the Big Bend and throughout Florida. STC had significant interest and participation in this program in 2025, and plans to continue and build upon its inaugural year's success in 2026.

If you live in Florida's Big Bend (or on Florida's Gulf Coast) and are interested in a BBEI presentation for your school, club, or group, reach out to evan@conserveturtles.org.

Local residents / businesses can also request free educational posters (pictured) through STC's website at conserveturtles.org/education-resource/big-bend-ed-poster/ 



Staff Spotlight - Dr. Rick Herren



Rick driving STC's research vessel "R/V Lavinia" during a sea turtle research trip.

Dr. Rick Herren is a Senior Biologist at Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC) and has worked 34 years in sea turtle research and conservation. Rick earned a B.S. from the University of Florida (UF) in Psychology and Zoology, a M.S. in Biology from the University of Central Florida, and a Ph.D. in Wildlife, Ecology, and Conservation from UF. He has an extensive background in mitigating human impacts to sea turtles. Before joining STC, Rick co-founded and managed two marine conservation non-profits and was the Coastal Biologist and Sea Turtle Habitat Conservation Plan Coordinator at Indian River County. Rick currently directs STC's in-water research projects in Florida, Bermuda, and Bahamas, as well as STC's state-wide sea turtle predation management project.

STC Research Assistant, Margaret Lilyestrom, recently caught up with Rick to ask him about his work.

Why did you get into this career and what made you stay with it?

I developed a passion for marine conservation in my early 20s, and after finishing my bachelor's degree,

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I decided to pursue it. A friend of mine invited me to visit a research team on a Georgia nesting beach where I was introduced to loggerheads. I wasn't planning it, but looking back, the experience almost seemed pre-destined. I became fascinated with them. I've stuck with this career for so long because sea turtles are a great indicator species for the health of our oceans and occur in so many different environments. And, there are a lot of things we still don't know, so studying them is a challenge.

You recently finished a Ph.D. Can you briefly describe your research and why you chose those topics?

I focused my Ph.D. research on sea turtle abundance, demography, and movements on Florida's Big Bend Coast. The area is one of the last remaining undeveloped coastlines in the southern U.S. and is an important foraging habitat for thousands of sea turtles. But, coastal development is increasing there, so it could be a very different place in 20 years, which makes it important to study the turtles there now. The Big Bend is also not far from our main office and UF faculty and students have a long history of studying sea turtles. So, it all came together with my advisor at UF and the support of STC's board, staff, and members.

What do you think is your greatest accomplishment to date?

I've worked with some very accomplished sea turtle biologists and those experiences gave me the confidence to create or improve on my own sea turtle projects. So, I think at this point in my career, watching projects I developed continue to get better, after leaving them in capable hands, that feels pretty good. I also hope that I've imparted my knowledge and skills onto younger generations and will continue to do that for as long as I can.

What advice do you have for young people who might want to get into this field?

I think it's important to take risks and volunteer.

That's how I got my start. You need to have a passion for it. The reality is you're not going to make a lot of money in this career. It will take time, but if you are patient, work hard, and gain skills, you can definitely make a living out of it and enjoy yourself at the same time.

Has your perspective about conservation changed throughout your career?

In some ways, it has changed because of the internet. I used to think it was enough to talk to people about facts and impart knowledge onto them. However, there seems to be a lot of skepticism about science these days and there's a lot of misinformation out there. So, I think for some people we have to go back to the beginning and get to know them first. Then we can show them what science is and why it's important in their lives before getting into a detailed discussion about conservation.

What do you think the average person can do for sea turtle conservation?

Sea turtles need the same things we all need: healthy water, air, and food sources. And, protected places to reproduce and shelter. When science reveals that these things are being significantly impacted, then I think people should take that seriously. The average person can stay informed on sea turtle science, make small changes to live in a healthier environment, and support leaders that will take science and conservation into account when they make decisions. 🐢



Rick releasing a sub-adult green turtle during a research trip in the Big Bend. FWC MTP #118 and NMFS Permit #21327.

STC Helps Improve Seagrass Health in the Indian River Lagoon

The Sea Turtle Conservancy at the Barrier Island Center is located on the 34-acre Doc Ehrhart Sanctuary, which has waterfront acreage along two sea turtle habitats, the beachfront Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, and the imperiled Indian River Lagoon (IRL). The IRL is a 156 mile-long estuary that provides critical developmental habitat for juvenile sea turtles. It has been threatened for decades due to development pressure and poor human choices. A complex multi-agency habitat restoration is in progress and STC is educating and engaging the local community in the recovery of this vital estuary.

Seagrass habitat is the lifeblood of the IRL, providing food and shelter for a diverse set of creatures, including juvenile green turtles, manatees, fish, and invertebrates. Additionally, healthy seagrass helps improve water quality by removing nutrients and stabilizing sand with their roots. However, seagrass is threatened in the IRL due to an influx of nutrients from human sources including fertilizers, human waste from leaky septic systems, storm water runoff, and agriculture. Nutrients have triggered algal blooms that have starved subtidal seagrass of sunlight, resulting in up to 58% loss of seagrass between 2011-2019 (Morris, L.J. et al. 2022). During 2023-2025, slight improvements in seagrass cover have been observed in the northern IRL and are starting to be seen in the central Lagoon. STC is assisting with the seagrass habitat recovery through a partnership with Sea and Shoreline, an aquatic restoration company and leader in seagrass habitat restoration.

STC is partnering with Sea and Shoreline by making seagrass planting units through general public Stewardship Workshops and our Conservation Career Training Program. These planting units are transported to the local seagrass nursery in Melbourne Beach where Sea and Shoreline's staff propagates seagrass that is then planted in the IRL to assist with the habitat recovery. STC's volunteers and interns have made 1,568 seagrass planting units during 2025.



BIC volunteers and the general public attended a Seagrass Restoration Stewardship Workshop in December 2025 and made 608 seagrass planting units.



New Live Seagrass Aquarium gifted to the Barrier Island Center through a grant from the Doris M. Carter Family Foundation.

Through the generosity of a grant from the Doris M. Carter Family Foundation, STC donated a new live seagrass aquarium to the Barrier Island Center. Sea and Shoreline is committed to providing the aquarium with live seagrass from their local seagrass nursery. This new exhibit will be observed by more than 30,000 visitors per year and will be used by our team to educate the community on the vital role seagrass plays in the health of the IRL.

Restoring seagrass in the IRL is essential to sea turtle health and survival, and STC is committed to doing our part to educate and engage the local community in the hands-on recovery. 🐢



4581 NW 6th Street, Suite A
Gainesville, FL 32609
(352) 373-6441
Fax: (352) 375-2449
stc@conserveturtles.org
www.conserveturtles.org

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New Turtle Tracking App Updates Launched!

Follow real sea turtles as they navigate thousands of miles across the world's oceans. Watch their journeys unfold in real time, learn their stories, and become part of the effort to protect them.

STC's Turtle Tracker app connects you directly to sea turtles fitted with satellite transmitters by researchers and conservationists. These aren't simulations – they're real animals, tracked as they migrate between feeding grounds, traverse ocean currents, and return to nest on the beaches where they were born.

Every turtle has a name, a history, and a journey worth following. See where they were released, how far they've traveled, and what they've been up to. Add your favorites and check in as their tracks grow across the map. The home feed shows you which turtles moved recently, highlights the week's top travelers, and keeps you connected to what's happening in real time.

Go Premium to support sea turtle conservation! Now with the option to upgrade to unlock leaderboards, exclusive features, and – most importantly – directly fund the research and protection efforts that keep these animals safe. Every subscription helps Sea Turtle Conservancy continue its work.



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