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Loggerhead Turtle Nesting Down by Half Since 1998

GAINESVILLE, Florida, November 8, 2007 (ENS) - At the most important loggerhead sea turtle nesting beach in the United States, turtle conservationists say loggerhead nesting has reached the lowest total since Florida began keeping official records in the 1980s.

This year only 7,896 nests were laid in the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge in Melbourne, Florida, says David Godfrey, executive director of the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, the world's oldest sea turtle conservation group, based in Gainesville.

"These turtles are being hammered in the Atlantic fisheries," Godfrey said. "While addressing this serious threat, we must also make sure reproductive turtles find good nesting beaches when they return home."

"Unfortunately, in many areas of Florida sea turtles will return to find miles of sea walls and new beachfront development. We are particularly concerned about a new experimental form of coastal armoring known as geotubes that are installed much farther seaward out on the beach than traditional vertical sea walls."

Sand-filled geotubes are like 1,000-ton sandbags. They are being installed on some of Florida's most important nesting beaches by homeowners trying to protect their properties from coastal erosion. Godfrey says geotubes can block turtles from nesting or cause them to nest in suboptimal habitat.

Nesting throughout Florida has declined by nearly 50 percent since 1998, a year that saw 21,450 loggerhead nests in the Carr Refuge alone.

All five species of sea turtles in Florida are listed as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

The Carr Refuge, named after world-renowned sea turtle biologist the late Dr. Archie Carr, is the nation's best indicator of loggerhead nesting populations across the country, Godfrey says.



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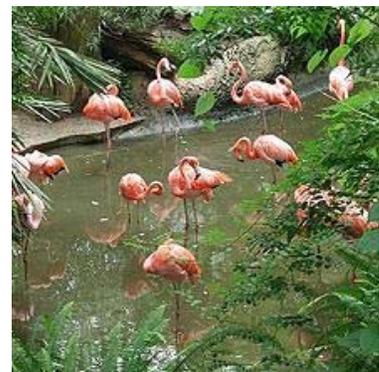
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About 90 percent of all loggerhead nesting in the continental United States takes place in Florida, with the highest nesting densities occurring in the Archie Carr Refuge.

"Loggerhead sea turtle deaths in Florida, as indicated by strandings - which include dead or dying turtles found on the beach or in the water - have more than doubled during the past decade," according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute.

While collisions with boats are the most common identifiable cause of trauma in sea turtles that wash up dead on Florida beaches, there are other threats to loggerhead survival.

Loggerheads suffer from artificial lighting on nesting beaches that causes hatchlings from nests to crawl inland rather than toward the water.

On developed beaches, coastal armoring meant to protect buildings from erosion has resulted in the loss of nesting habitat near natural dunes throughout the state.

Statewide nesting numbers just released by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission show a decline of 49 percent of loggerhead nesting since 1998, a peak year.

Nest counts for green turtles and leatherback turtles in Florida show an opposite trend over the same period. These two species nest on many of the same beaches in Florida as the loggerhead, but in much smaller numbers. Although the loss of nesting habitat is a significant issue for the long-term future of Florida's sea turtles, Godfrey says it is not the primary cause of the loggerheads' decline.

He urges state and federal agencies to "strengthen conservation efforts to address the root causes of this decline."

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