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## Loggerheads begin three-month Tour de Turtles marathon



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INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — Hundreds of people watched this weekend as four loggerhead turtles were outfitted with satellite tracking devices and released two each from starting gates Saturday morning at Disney's Vero Beach Resort and Sunday morning at the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge Barrier Island Center.

The four will join six other turtles released from critical nesting sites in Panama, Nevis and Tortuguero, plus one turtle from Tampa, for the sixth annual Sea Turtle Conservancy Tour de Turtles: A Sea Turtle Migration Marathon.

The nesting turtles had dragged their massive bodies up to the dune line the nights before the releases to begin the laborious process of laying eggs in the sand.

Afterward, researchers transported them to the release areas, attached small transmitters to their carapaces and kept watch over them until the crowds arrived.

As respectful admirers lined the way, the turtles made their way back into the surf, almost instinctively giving ample time for cellphones and cameras to capture the moment before vanishing into the ocean.

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“We’re going to be releasing, with the Tampa Bay Green Consortium and the Florida Aquarium, a rehabilitated Kemp’s ridley turtle. We have a lot of firsts coming out of this little turtle – it’s our first Kemp’s ridley release in Tour de Turtles, our first rehabilitated turtle participating, and our first Gulf Coast turtle.”

She explained that this Kemp’s ridley juvenile, the most endangered and smallest of sea turtles, was a victim of red tide.

“We’re interested to see how rehabilitated turtles integrate back into their migratory patterns after they’ve been in a rehab facility rather than their normal nesting area. It will be fun to see what this little turtle does. It’s going to have some impact for the aquarium’s rehabilitative efforts.”

The enlightening three-month migratory journey also features four other varieties – leatherback, loggerhead, hawks bill and green sea turtles - from their nesting beaches to foraging grounds.

For more than 100 million years, turtles have returned to lay eggs on the same beaches where they first entered the sea as hatchlings.

Their numbers plummeted in recent history thanks to human-related threats, but through inclusion in the Endangered Species Act and efforts by conservation groups they are making an arduous comeback.

The 20.5-mile Archie Carr Refuge spans from northern Indian River County to Melbourne Beach, buffered by the Sebastian Inlet State Park.

A particularly vital nesting area, it is identified as the most productive beach in the world for loggerhead turtle nesting, and the most significant in North America for green turtles.

Tour de Turtles “competitors” will be tracked to determine which of the 11 swims the furthest distance and which will win the Causes Challenge.

The public is encouraged to “adopt” turtles, whose causes represent man-made threats to their ultimate survival.

Weighing in at a svelte 300 to 350 pounds, the local competitors are Carrie, Claire, Ripley and Johnny. They represent their sponsors and causes: Carrie - Disney’s Animal Programs and Disney’s Vero Beach Resort, light pollution; Claire - Disney’s Worldwide Conservation Fund, plastic debris; Ripley - Ripley’s Aquariums, poor water quality; and Johnny - John’s Island, beach re-nourishment.

Bridging the two morning send-offs, on Saturday evening a sold-out crowd of 350 turtle enthusiasts gathered at the Archie Carr Barrier Island Center for a Tour de Turtles celebratory fundraiser.

Sultry ocean breezes and enormous fans provided relief from the heat as guests enjoyed music by the Riverside Band and refreshments on the deck, while indoors, an assortment of colorful marine-themed auction items enticed bidders.

Celebrated marine artist Roberto “Pasta” Pantaleo of the Signature Gallery in Islamorada donated his talent to create an exquisite mural spanning the length of the Barrier Island Center.

Equipment and supplies for the project were donated by Sherwin Williams and McAlhany Construction.

“The building is gorgeous and it has a great location on the ocean, but I just thought something was missing,” explained Pantaleo.

“People drive by without realizing what it is; I wanted to bring a greater awareness to the center.”

Sunday morning after the turtle release, children brought out their inner artist, helping Pantaleo to paint a second mural by the deck.

Turtle scout volunteer Jill Uttridge, who headed out later that evening to help seek nesting turtles for the marathon is also on the board of Friends of Carr Refuge, which hopes to encourage greater participation by Indian River County residents.

"We're focused on everything associated with the refuge - beach mice, rare and endangered plants – the whole refuge," explained fellow board member Vince Lamb.

Students from the University of Florida Marine Turtle Research Group would also later assist with the release turtles.

"We've been studying this beach for 30 years," said graduate student Christopher Lang, who has worked on the project the past four years.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service numbers are extremely encouraging according to refuge manager Kristen Kneifl.

"We've had some really exciting news. We just broke our green record for the refuge; the most ever since 1982 when they started monitoring. Back then they only had 50 nests."

Greens nest until October and as of July 16 there were already 5,265 nests.

"We've also beaten the 10,000 mark for loggerheads, but it's not as many as last year which was a record year for them."

Unfortunately, while the numbers may sound high, the mortality rate is even greater. Only one hatchling in 1,000 survives to adulthood.

It's not too late to support Tour de Turtles or follow their progress. Visit [www.tourdeturtles.org](http://www.tourdeturtles.org).

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