

Do Your Part! Let's Keep Our Beaches Healthy and Beautiful!

It's mid August and that means we are 2/3 through the Loggerhead Sea Turtle Nesting and Hatching Season. Beachfront property managers have been doing a great job with lighting compliance for our sea turtles by shading or turning off lights that shine on the beach by 9 PM nightly and giving constant reminders to their residents and visitors about the lighting and beach equipment rules on the beaches of Marco Island. To date there are 65 nests with 20 hatched. Though the number of nest is higher than the past few years, it has been a season of variables – wet sand due to high tides; hot weather, then very rainy weather causing relocations of nests and varied incubation times. Time will tell what the overall hatchling success will be. With only one out of one thousand hatchlings that statistically making it to adulthood - every hatchling counts!

This period of the nesting and hatching season is busy – adult females turtles are still crawling to nest on the Marco Island beaches and there are many more nests yet to hatch. Unfortunately, there have been a few nests that disorientated due to issues that could be prevented easily. All sea turtle conservation rules are in effect and very important for the remainder of the season. Beachfront dwellers please continue to shade windows and turn off all unnecessary lights by 9 PM nightly. Property managers and volunteers will be checking your lighting from the beach – if it causes a shadow, the lights are too bright.

This summer has also brought numerous reports of people using flashlights and lights from cell phones on the beach at night. For sea turtle conservation and protection, on all beaches in Florida, from May 01 through October 31 yearly, after 9 PM, no lights on the beach are allowed. This means shading windows or turning off lights that shine on the beach by 9 PM, which includes flashlights, flash photography, photos and videos with cell phones and lanterns. On a crescent beach such as Marco Island, lights, even flashlights or cell phone lights, can cause disorientation of sea turtles at the location they are on and also to a turtle or hatching nest at the other end of the beach. If you walk the beach at night, your eyes do adjust to the natural lighting the moon and stars provide reflecting off the Gulf of Mexico. Do you part – keep our beaches dark!

A surprising issue has popped up this summer on the beach that would probably not cross many peoples' minds but has caused a number of hatchling deaths. The issue is holes dug in the sand by beach goers. The holes that are dug and left on the beach are a "trap" for hatchlings as they make their way to the Gulf. Numbers of dead hatchlings, and thankfully some live, have been found in holes on the Marco Island beach. Please remember to "leave no trace behind on the beach except your footprints" – which includes covering up holes that are dug on the beach. Not leaving the holes is obviously also for public safety of pedestrians and vehicles. Some of the holes left recently on beach are large and deep enough to trip and cause injury to unsuspecting beach walker and also could stop an ATV or police car.

Sea turtles are one of the many species on the Marco Island beaches that are protected. This week, the Marco Island Chamber of Commerce has had a concern reported to them from a visitor. She reported seeing two women “dredging up” sand dollars along the water line and then selling them for a dollar to beach-goers! Marco Island is fortunate to have an abundant population of sand dollars which live in sandy shallows, sea grasses and just off the beach under thin covers of sand. Many of us collect the small and large, white, smooth sand dollars as they wash ashore daily. The white and smooth sand dollars are not alive; they are shells – the exoskeleton of a once live sand dollar. These shells can be collected and enjoyed. But when they are alive, they have a felt-like coating of fine brown to dark purple moveable spines. These spines, or tiny tube feet, gather plankton and carry this food to their mouths, or chewing apparatus in the center of the sand dollar, called Aristotle’s Lantern. The holes or notches in the sand dollar help the live sand dollar to sink into the sand and be covered. If these women were “dredging” or digging into the sand, they were taking live sand dollars. Live shelling is illegal in the State of Florida. For good reason – the more live shells taken, the less we will all have to collect in future years.

Please report any lighting issues, or injured, disorientated and dead sea turtles or live shelling to the City of Marco Island at 239-389-5003 or use the FWC Hotline 1-888-404-3922 (FWCC). Thank you for doing your part in keeping the Marco Island beaches healthy, beautiful and ours to enjoy for many, many years to come.