



Sea Turtle related photos taken at Perdido Key:

- [Turtle Tracks](#)
- [Turtle Hatchlings](#)

[Pensacola News Journal, August 24, 2008](#)

Hatchling sea turtles need help from humans to survive

Alan Dennis

Ninety-one is a pretty big number, especially when you're counting sea turtles. This number has been on my mind, as it represents the number of turtles that hatched from a single nest on Perdido Key recently.

Sadly, they all perished.

In truth, the lives of the 91 babies ended almost as quickly as they began. Because as they emerged from their nest their eyes focused on a single stimulus ... light ... the stimulus that has directed turtle behavior for thousands of years.

Regrettably, this light was not the natural light that guided their ancestors. It was artificial, created by man, and, to a baby sea turtle, indistinguishable from natural light. Instead of turning south to the security of the water, the new hatchlings crawled north toward the lights.

Must be there

In a matter of hours, confused and fatigued, their lives ended.

For several years I've participated as a turtle volunteer trying to help prevent what happened on Saturday, Aug. 9. Volunteering actually comes down to one event — being there the night baby sea turtles emerge from their nest to prevent them from being disoriented by artificial lighting.

Predicting this exact date is much like predicting the birth date for any expectant mother. All we can reference is the date the mother turtle crawled onto the beach to lay her eggs and add 60 days.

The rest is up to nature.

Volunteers look and listen for several signs to indicate an impending hatch. During daily inspections, they note the condition of the sand around the nest and use stethoscopes to listen for activity.

Still, it's an unpredictable science.

Unfortunately, Turtle Nest No. 1 on Perdido Key didn't show any hatching signs on Aug. 9, and by 10 p.m. volunteers left, believing the nest would be safe for another night. Several

hours later, as we turned off the Olympics and prepared for bed, 91 baby sea turtles emerged and began aimlessly searching for the warm Gulf waters.

It was not an isolated incident.

Light disorientation has been a major concern of turtle experts for years. During the past two years I have participated in many turtle hatchings. In nearly every instance, as the baby turtles emerged from their nest, they have turned toward the artificial light of condos, homes, businesses and parking lots rather than south to the Gulf.

Had volunteers not been there, nearly 2,000 turtles hatched during this two-year period would have perished. In fact, on at least two occasions nests were lost with no volunteers present.

Currently, there are seven remaining nests on Perdido Key, each holding 80-140 eggs. These nests will be hatching at various times until the middle of October. Volunteers will continue to be there to ensure the hatchlings' survival.

Things we can do

So what can we do? Everyone who lives on or near our beaches can help with this important natural event by:

- Turning off beach-side exterior lighting, or better yet, installing wildlife-friendly bulbs and fixtures.
- Closing beach-side window shades.
- Supporting local initiatives to incorporate wildlife-friendly lighting in residences, businesses and traffic areas.
- Covering holes in the sand near turtle nests, and notifying authorities of turtle activities.
- Calling for carefully planned development in these sensitive areas.

Perdido Key is home to at least six listed endangered species, four of which are sea turtles. It is important that federal protection laws be recognized and enforced.

As Escambia County continues its push for the removal of the dwelling cap on Perdido Key, environmental issues, specifically the protection of Perdido Key's habitat for endangered species, will continue to be a major concern.

What happened to Turtle Nest No. 1 is a strong argument for how serious environmental issues have become — especially as they relate to development in environmentally sensitive areas that are sanctuaries to federally protected species.

Postscript: On Monday, Aug. 18, at 9:45 p.m., under a full moon and starlit sky Turtle Nest No. 2 on Perdido Key hatched.



With the cooperation of homeowners from Sandy Key Condominiums and Parasol East, and with the assistance of turtle volunteers and the Gulf Islands National Seashore park ranger, 99 baby sea turtles found their way to the water.

Alan Dennis is a member of the Perdido Key Association board of directors. This viewpoint is his personal opinion and not intended to represent that of the association.