



Life on Loggerhead

The largest island in the Dry Tortugas, Loggerhead Key has seen many changes in its history. From a site of shipwrecks, to a world-class lighthouse installation, to a cutting-edge marine research laboratory, to a goal for Cuban refugees, Loggerhead Key is a part of the crossroads that are the Dry Tortugas.

Loggerhead Lives

Named for its abundance of loggerhead sea turtles, Loggerhead Key has long been a haven for wildlife. Migrating birds flock here on their way north, and coral fishes are abundant in the coral reefs just offshore. But sea turtles are perhaps the most abundant species on the island, with approximately 250 nests yielding 15,000 hatchlings each summer. The Dry Tortugas support the largest green and loggerhead sea turtle nesting grounds in the Florida Keys.

Mariners were often attracted to the sea turtles on Loggerhead as a food source for their sea voyage, but they found the Tortugas to be a dangerous place. More than 250 shipwrecks have been documented in these waters. Upon acquisition of Florida from the Spanish in 1821, the US government was immediately interested in constructing a lighthouse in the Tortugas to protect mariners from the reefs. Construction of the first lighthouse in the Tortugas began on Garden Key in 1825. This lighthouse (later replaced by the iron light atop Fort Jefferson) proved to be too short, too dim, and too far away from other reefs.

In 1856, construction began on a taller lighthouse on Loggerhead Key. 150 feet tall and topped with a 1st order Fresnel lens (replaced

with a 2nd order bivalve lens in 1909), the new light was observed at a distance of 53 miles. The 2nd order lens is now on display at the National Aids to Navigation School in Yorktown, VA.

While the lighthouse was under construction, a contractor finished construction of a house and kitchen (as seen in the 1870 image above). The main house burned in 1945, but the kitchen (the smaller brick house in the image above) still stands and is occupied by National Park Service volunteer caretakers. A "new" lighthouse keeper's house to the north of the lighthouse was built for the keeper's family in the 1920s.

Fort Jefferson on Garden Key was under construction at the same time as Loggerhead Light. This made for interesting times for the lighthouse keepers. One soldier stationed in Fort Jefferson recalled that to relieve boredom, "at times, a group of us would steal over to Loggerhead Key to have strong drink and shout at the stars." Loggerhead was also the destination for many escape attempts from Fort Jefferson's prison. One successful escapee paddled a makeshift raft to Loggerhead, then stole the keeper's boat and rowed to Cuba. Another desperate prisoner swam to the island on a piece of wood with a ball and chain attached to his ankle!

Carnegie Laboratory

The Dry Tortugas have long been recognized for their pristine ecosystem. The most significant scientific research in the Tortugas was conducted on Loggerhead Key in the Laboratory for Marine Ecology, operated by the Carnegie Institute. From 1905 to 1939, Carnegie Laboratory scientists studied the reefs and waters of the Tortugas. Among the Carnegie Laboratory's significant scientific contributions include the first underwater black and white and color photography. Although the laboratory was destroyed by hurricanes over the years, a monument to the lab's founder, Alfred Mayor, remains on the northern part of the island.



View of the Carnegie Laboratory on Loggerhead Key, 1912. Image was taken from the lab's windmill, looking south toward the lighthouse.

Coast Guard

The US Lighthouse Service maintained Loggerhead Light through World War II, when lighthouse duty was transferred to the US Coast Guard. Single lighthouse keepers stayed six weeks, followed by three weeks ashore. Their chief complaints were the lack of women, having to cook for each other, and the isolation, reporting "the first week here is glorious, the second is all right, but the third begins to drag." The light was fully automated in 1982 and all Coast Guard staff left the island.



From 1962 to 1982, transportation, fuel, and water were provided to the Loggerhead Key keepers by the US Coast Guard cutter Hollyhock (above). Food was brought over weekly by a Park Service boat.

Recent History

Long-time visitors to Loggerhead Key remember it being forested with Australian pines. The National Park Service removed the pines in the late 1990s as part of a plan to introduce native species onto the islands and provide better nesting habitat for the park's namesake sea turtles. The Park Service also removed the island's diesel generator and installed solar panels for electricity needs. The island is now totally self-sufficient on solar power.

In recent years, the number of Cuban migrants to the Tortugas has skyrocketed. Under current United States policy, Cuban migrants seeking to escape Cuba must have one "dry foot" on American soil to stay in the country, claim certain benefits, and pursue citizenship. Many migrants seek to enter the country (illegally) on Loggerhead Key due to its isolation.

Park staff detail migrants and provide them with basic necessities until the US Coast Guard transports them to Key West, releasing them in Miami after processing. Homemade boats known as "chugs" and related fuel and other waste still litter Loggerhead's beaches, despite park staff's best efforts to clean up afterwards.

In early 2007, Dry Tortugas National Park began implementation of the Research Natural Area, or RNA. The RNA is a 46-square mile no-take ecological preserve that provides a sanctuary for species affected by overfishing and loss of habitat. This created new rules for public use on and around Loggerhead Key. For more information on the RNA, consult the "Park Regulations" and "What Is A Research Natural Area" publications or talk to park staff.

A Crossroads

The Dry Tortugas have long been a crossroads of natural and human influences. Sea turtles migrate here to lay their eggs and seabirds fly thousands of miles to nest here. Historically, people came here because of the area's strategic location along the Florida Straits. Today people

come to Loggerhead Key for many of the same reasons that wildlife has come here for millennia: a pristine natural setting, isolation and quiet. Please help maintain the pristine setting of Loggerhead Key during your visit.