YOU Can Help

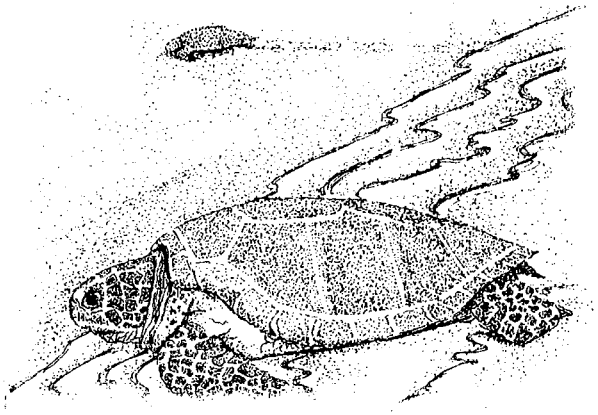
1. Possessing turtle parts is illegal. Leave any dead sea turtle you may find undisturbed. Write down where you found the turtle and, if it was tagged, the number, color and type of tag. All sea turtles are classified as either threatened or endangered species, and are protected by federal law. Moving a carcass or removing parts from one is prohibited by the Endangered Species Act. If the turtle was found in Canaveral National Seashore report the finding to the Information Center or Ranger Station, or call (386) 428-3384 or (321) 867-4077. If found outside the park, call the Florida Marine Patrol at (321) 383-2740 or 1-800-342-5367.
2. Canaveral National Seashore is closed at night, but should you encounter turtles on a beach outside the park, turn off flashlights and car lights and do not interfere with the turtle's activities. If a sea turtle is disturbed, it will not nest.
3. Attend a conducted program or a nighttime "Turtle Watch" to learn more about sea turtles. Turtle Watches take place at night in June and July. Ask a park ranger for details.

Sea Turtles

of Canaveral National Seashore

Canaveral

Sea Turtles



Canaveral National Seashore serves as an important nesting area for sea turtles. During the months of May through August, giant sea turtles lumber ashore to nest on the beach. Three species are known to nest within the park: the loggerhead, leatherback and green sea turtles. Loggerheads lay 3,000-4,000 nests per year. Up to three hundred greens and only a few leatherbacks deposit their eggs within the park boundaries each nesting season.

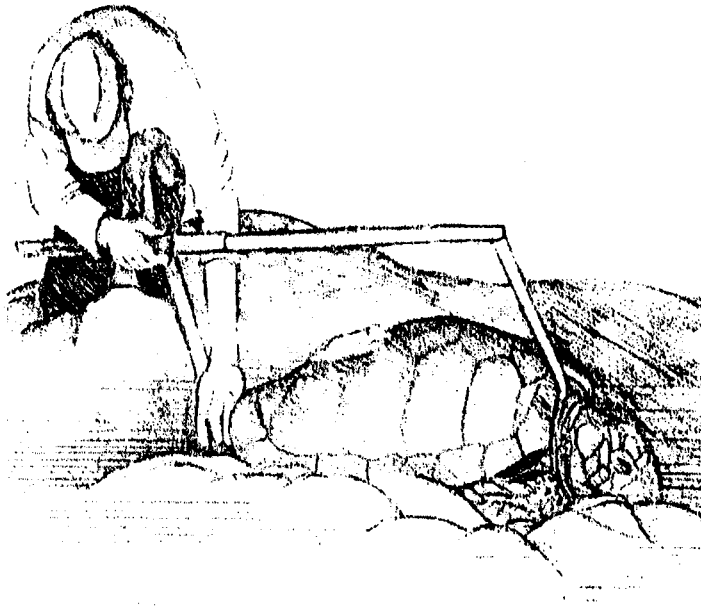
The sea turtles lay approximately 100 round, white, leathery eggs in each nest. Prior to 1984, most of the eggs laid within the seashore were eaten by raccoons, and to a lesser extent by ghost crabs. Some nests are lost when beaches erode during storms.

If the eggs survive, they begin to hatch in about sixty days. The first turtles to hatch will wait until their nest-mates have left their eggshells. Because of the depth of the nest, it would be difficult for one three-inch hatchling to emerge from the eighteen-inch deep nest by itself. There is also safety in numbers. When the cool sand signals the safety of nighttime, the hatchlings gradually dig their way out of the nest in a united effort to make their way to the sand's surface.

Many hazards await the hatchlings when they reach the surface of the nest. Ghost crabs, birds, raccoons and the drying heat of the early morning sun are waiting for the tiny turtles as they try to make it to the ocean.

Once the turtles make it past the surf, they swim to a region of the Atlantic Ocean known as the Sargassum Sea, a large area of seaweed which drifts with the ocean currents. Here the hatchlings feed on seaweed and tiny animals and seek protection from predators. When they reach adolescence, some turtles return to the inshore waters of Mosquito Lagoon.

The ocean holds more hazards than just the sea turtles' natural predators. Many deaths are attributed to entanglement in fishing lines, collision with ships and boat propellers, drowning in commercial fishing nets and ingesting plastic fragments or congealed oil.



Research in the Park

In the early 1980's, researchers found raccoons were destroying 98 percent of Canaveral's turtle nests. The park began a program to help reverse this trend. After experimenting with several different ways of protecting the eggs, park rangers found that by securing a wire mesh screen over the nest, raccoons were prevented from digging into the nests. The small hatchlings could still exit the nest through the openings in the mesh. During the months of May through August, park rangers and volunteers work each night to screen the nests. After two months, when all the eggs have hatched, the screens are removed and one of every ten nests is excavated to monitor the success rate. Over 80 percent of the turtle nests have been protected using this method.