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## Turtle-nesting time digs up fears about loggerheads' future

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ORMOND BEACH

High tide washed away her tracks on the beach. People apparently trampled on the sand pile where she had been digging.

But there was still enough evidence that a female loggerhead sea turtle had been busy the night before, making the first sea-turtle nest in Volusia County this year.

Beth Libert, president of the Volusia-Flagler Turtle Patrol, said that although some nesting clues were gone, "We'll mark it just to err on the side of caution."

Florida officially began the sea-turtle-nesting season this month with scientists viewing the status of loggerhead sea turtles with caution and concern.

Last year was the lowest nesting season on record for the loggerheads -- about half of the 1998 peak -- at the beaches used by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute to study long-term trends.

What happens to Florida loggerheads is critical because the state hosts 90 percent of the nation's loggerhead-turtle nests.

Federal officials are considering whether it's time to classify that group of reptiles as endangered, with their risk of extinction increasing as the nest counts have plummeted.

Loggerheads are the only marine turtles considered threatened, but the petition before the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would redefine the loggerheads that nest along the southeastern U.S. coast as a separate group facing a more dire risk.

The final tally of this year's nests will be a key factor in the decision, which could be announced later this year.

"We're always hoping the nesting numbers will come up and whether that will pass in 2008 is anybody's guess," said Barbara Schroeder, national sea-turtle coordinator for the Fisheries Service. "We are concerned about the decline."

A steep decline is evident from the nest counts at the state's index 27 beaches, which are those used for research and trend analysis by the state wildlife institute, an arm of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Loggerhead nests had been increasing for the first decade of records, from the 1989 total of 39,083 nests and peaking in 1998 with 59,918 nests. Then the nest counts dropped during the second decade, reaching a record low of 28,074 last year.

"The number of nests is a very direct reflection of the number of nesting females, so we're worried about the population," said Anne Meylan, research administrator at the state commission. "We're definitely anxious with this year's nesting season, especially after many years of decline."

That decline doesn't bode well for the future of the turtles. Fewer nests now mean that there will be fewer nesting females when the current generation of baby hatchlings returns to its home beach in 30 years to lay eggs.

Reclassification as an endangered species could help the loggerhead sea turtles survive threats from fishing-related deaths and global warming, said Miyoko Sakashita, a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the environmental organizations asking for the status change.

One benefit of the change could be additional protections for the turtle's most critical habitat, including beach nesting areas or areas in the ocean where they congregate.

The overall loggerhead numbers don't tell the whole story, said Lew Ehrhart, a veteran biologist and a senior research fellow with the Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute.

Turtle researchers have been debating what is wrong with the population, he said. One group thinks the decline is a sign of the population being killed by the long-line commercial fishing in the Atlantic. Others are more cautious about blaming the fisheries.

"There is the possibility this is related to natural events we're only beginning to understand," said Ehrhart, who has been tracking turtle nests at the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge for decades.

Reflecting the statewide totals, the refuge had its lowest year ever for loggerhead nests, at 6,405, he said. Meanwhile, the other two groups that nest at the refuge, green sea turtles and leatherback sea turtles, had "phenomenal" nesting tallies last year.

Loggerhead turtles started nesting at the refuge April 24, with about 22 new nests a night, but the early pace of nesting can't predict how the season will end, he said.

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