

Sea turtle protection plan includes South Florida beaches



Loggerhead turtle (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration / March 22, 2013)

David Fleshler, Sun Sentinel
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The entire coastline of Palm Beach County and the northern portion of Broward County would be designated critical habitat for loggerhead sea turtles, under a proposal announced Friday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The government plans to protect more than 739 miles of beach from North Carolina to Mississippi for the threatened turtles, whose annual visits to lay eggs now take place on vastly altered coastlines from those that persisted for thousands of years.

The designation of critical habitat does not mean the beaches would be set aside as preserves, limited public access or construction and other activities prohibited. It would simply require federal agencies to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before issuing permits, funding projects or taking any other action that could affect the shore-

line. This could include issuing federal permits for beach renourishment or, on occasion, coastal construction.

There's disagreement about the significance of the proposed new designation. Federal wildlife officials downplayed the potential impact, saying it would be "negligible" and simply add another layer of review, largely overlapping protections that already exist under the Endangered Species Act.

"We do not envision that additional landowner or use restrictions will result from this critical habitat designation," said Sandra MacPherson, national sea turtle coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Most if not all coastal landowners are accustomed to existing federal and state conservation and permitting requirements to protect sea turtles and other coastal wildlife, and these conditions are already incorporated into permits."

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www.ShopAtHome.com/RestaurantsOthers say the consequences could be significant. Alan DeSerio, managing attorney of the Atlantic office of the Pacific Legal Foundation, a conservative law firm that has sued on behalf of Florida developers to limit endangered species protections, said it's too soon to assess the economic impact but that it could be severe.

"We can say, however, that the designation of critical habitat will give the federal government a veto power regarding land use within the area designated, often with disastrous economic results," he said in an email.

Jaclyn Lopez, Florida attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the designation of critical habitat easily could have negligible impact unless environmental groups use it as a legal tool to protect the coastal areas where loggerheads nest.

“It’s a really clear message that these beaches are important for the survival of the species and we have to take good care of them,” she said.

Loggerheads come ashore in the thousands during nesting season, crawling awkwardly onto the sand to dig a hole and deposit eggs before returning to the ocean. The proposal to officially designate critical habitat for the species comes at a time of great success for South Florida’s sea turtles, with Broward and Palm Beach counties both reporting record or near-record counts, with 3,284 loggerhead nests last year in Broward County and 22,293 in Palm Beach County.

But sea turtles remain menaced by a host of threats, including coastal development and artificial lighting on shore, and shrimp nets and other commercial fishing gear off shore.

The Broward segment would run from Hillsboro Inlet north to the county line. Lou Fisher, Broward County’s sea turtle coordinator, said he found it odd that the protected habitat would stop at the Hillsboro Inlet, since high numbers of sea turtle nests persist for several miles to the south, dropping off only around Dania Beach.

The wildlife service’s announcement comes after a lawsuit by the Center for Biological Diversity, Oceana, and Turtle Island Restoration Network to force the government agency to designate critical habitat, but its officials said they already had been at work on the proposal.

Although this would not be the nation’s largest stretch of critical habitat — the 1,798 miles of southeastern coastline for the wintering piping plover easily exceeds it — it is clearly an extensive territory, and environmental groups that had gone to court to force the government’s hand said they’re happy with the result.

“We’re very pleased that the service has acknowledged this large an area as critical habitat,” Lopez said.

The wildlife service is accepting public comments on the proposal through May 24. The agency could take up to a year and half to take final action, since it has to review the public comments, complete an economic analysis and put that out for comment, too, before making critical habitat designation official, said Chuck Underwood, spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service