

# Tampa Bay Times

## Feds declare 300 miles of Florida beaches critical habitat for loggerheads



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In a move likely to affect the building of new sea walls, federal officials Wednesday announced that they had designated hundreds of miles of beaches in Florida and six other states as critical habitat for loggerhead sea turtles.

The areas designated for the turtles stretch from North Carolina to Mississippi and encompass 84 percent of all known loggerhead nesting areas. However, the announcement from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration did not include any of Pinellas County's beaches, which frequently see nesting turtles.

Still, Florida beaches account for about 300 of the 685 miles

of beaches now classified as important to the future of loggerheads, according to Jaclyn Lopez of the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental organization that sued federal officials to push for the habitat ruling.

The Florida segments of the turtles' critical habitat begin with a few Panhandle beaches near Pensacola and Apalachicola. Then the segments resume in the Sarasota area, continue along the gulf coast near Fort Myers and Naples, hopscotch around the Keys, skip Miami-Dade and most of Broward counties, then meander northward along stretches of the Atlantic coast from Palm Beach County up to near Jacksonville.

That means the areas will include some areas of the state that have debated saving sea turtle nesting areas versus saving beachfront homes and condominiums from falling into the ocean.

"That will be something to consider" during permitting of sea walls and other erosion-prevention structures, said Susan Pultz, a NOAA biologist who worked on creating the habitat. Those structures "could affect hatchlings trying to get off the beach and affect females' ability to get onto the beach to nest."

For instance, it would include the Palm Beach County community of Singer Island, which protrudes farther into the Atlantic than any other part of Florida's coastline and is one of the best places in the state for loggerhead, hawksbill and green sea turtles to lay their eggs.

Beach erosion has been a big problem for Singer Island's condominiums, so much so that five years ago state and federal politicians were pushing for a \$30 million taxpay-

er-funded project to build 11 rock walls about 200 feet off Singer Island's beach. Experts said the walls would only slow down the erosion but likely block the sea turtles from nesting. In the end, county officials withdrew their application for a permit for the breakwater.

The loggerhead is the most common sea turtle in the Southeast, but like all species of sea turtles it is considered imperiled. Slow-growing loggerheads are vulnerable to being hit by boats and snagged in fishing nets. Since 1978, they have been classified as a threatened species.

The habitat declaration also includes more than 300,000 square miles of the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico, making it the largest critical habitat area in U.S. history, Lopez said. The ocean area was included because it contains sargassum, a type of seaweed that provides food, cover and warm water for the optimal growth of young loggerheads.