

Hilton Faces Lawsuit Over Harm to Turtles Caused by Florida Resort Lights

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Environmentalists claim the resort even kept its disorienting lights on in May while it was closed to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic. A sea turtle seen while scuba diving. (Courthouse News photo/Bill Girdner)

ATLANTA (CN) — Two conservation groups said Thursday they plan to sue a Hilton resort in Fort Lauderdale Beach for violations of the Endangered Species Act if the resort doesn't change outdoor and indoor lighting practices that the environmentalists say harm nesting and hatchling sea turtles.

Attorneys representing Sea Turtle Oversight Protection and the Center for Biological Diversity issued a notice of intent to sue, claiming the Bahia Mar Resort and Yachting Center's lights have disoriented more than 3,000 loggerhead and green sea turtle hatchlings since 2016.

The turtle populations nesting in the area have been designated as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



A sea turtle seen while scuba diving. (Courthouse News photo/Bill Girdner)

According to Thursday's letter, the resort, which features bright blue lights along its exterior facades, is located on prime nesting grounds for loggerhead and green sea turtles. The groups say the lights cause hatchlings to move in the wrong direction when they leave their nests, crawling toward the hotel instead of the ocean.

Disorientation, the letter states, "may result in them being killed by predators or struck by vehicles, or cause them to die of exhaustion or dehydration."

The environmentalists also warn that artificial lighting can cause adult turtles to abandon their nesting efforts, leading to fewer successful nests.

The two groups claim that the city of Fort Lauderdale issued citations to the resort for its harmful artificial lighting in 2016 and 2019. Although Sea Turtle Oversight Protection says it has filed 30 complaints about the lighting with the city, it claims the resort continues to use noncompliant lighting and even kept the lights on in May while the hotel was closed to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The letter offers a few solutions to the lighting problem, including the installation of shields to direct exterior lights toward the ground and the use of wildlife-certified, amber-colored LEDs.

The notice claims that the resort ignored a June 10 letter from the groups describing the violations and offering to help develop a plan to remedy the lighting issues.

The groups say they're giving the resort 60 days to fix their violations of the Endangered Species Act and Fort Lauderdale's city code.

Representatives for Rahn Bahia Mar LLC and Hilton Hotels did not immediately respond to requests for comment Thursday afternoon.

Richard WhiteCloud, president of Sea Turtle Oversight Protection, said in a statement Thursday that the resort must be "held accountable" for the turtles that have been harmed by the lights.

"The Bahia Mar Resort and Marina and the Hilton Double Tree hotel have ignored their responsibility to protect sea turtles from artificial light on their properties for far too long," WhiteCloud said.

"Fort Lauderdale Beach is prime habitat for these miraculous creatures, and we're hopeful Hilton will do the right thing by fixing its lighting problem," said Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "With hatchlings continuing to emerge, the resort must act quickly to ensure no more sea turtles are harmed."