COVID-19 Restrictions May Boost Leatherback Sea Turtle Nesting

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Every spring, Florida's shoreline welcomes a swath of seaworthy visitors: female leatherback turtles, crawling ashore to swaddle their eggs in the sand.

In past years, this ritual has been imperiled by increasing amounts of human activity, with abandoned trash, plastic and bits of fishing gear threatening to choke or snare the marine creatures. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to beaches is restricted, clearing coasts of people and their waste. Without humans in their way, Florida turtles may be poised to have an exceptionally successful breeding year, reports Richard Luscombe for the Guardian. Just two weeks into the turtles' typical nesting season, researchers at the Loggerhead MarineLife Center in Juno Beach have already noted more than 75 nests on the stretch of shore they monitor—a significant increase over last year's figures.

Because the turtles' spawning period, which lasts well into the summer, has only barely begun, such reports remain preliminary—but experts seem optimistic.

Young leatherback sea turtles. (Martin Harvey / Getty Images)

"Our leatherbacks are coming in strong this year," Sarah Hirsch, the senior manager of research and data at Loggerhead Marinelife Center, tells Kristen Chapman at West Palm Beach news channel 12. "We're excited to see our turtles thrive in this environment."

Leatherbacks, the largest sea turtles in the world, mate at sea, then creep ashore to excavate their nests around the time when winter turns to spring. Buried in layers of sand, the soft, fragile eggs will incubate for about two months before hatching, yielding teeny turtlets that will scour the skyline for natural light reflecting off water to find their way to the sea.

With a breeding season that largely overlaps with humans' beachtrotting summers, leatherbacks and their nests are especially vulnerable where foot traffic is high and the sands are cluttered. Turtles have been seen ingesting bits of garbage floating out to sea, or getting snared as bycatch in fishing nets. Hatchlings are also easily discombobulated by artificial lights, which can lure them inland instead of to the water's edge. In Florida, hundreds of thousands of sea turtle nests speckle the state's coastline each year, according to the Guardian. Only one in every 1,000 hatchlings survives—a number that plunges even further on especially popular beaches.

But physical distancing measures and a stark dip in tourism has reduced the number of people outdoors. (Florida is among several states already in the midst of relaxing restrictions in public places, including many beaches, but the reopenings aren't yet universal.) As Rosie McCall reports for Newsweek, the absence of beachgoers—if sustained—may afford turtles the peace and quiet they need to mate and hatch.

"If you don't have quite as much trash on the beach, if you don't have as many beach chairs on the beach and things like that [turtles are] running into, then we might see more favorable conditions for these animals," Derek Burkholder of Nova Southeastern University, who is program manager of Florida's Broward County Sea Turtle Conservation Program, tells Catie Switalski at WLRN.

A similar case seems to be playing out in Thailand, where researchers have found 11 leatherback nests near the Phuket Marine Biological Center since November—the most in two decades for the vulnerable species, Kongkiat Kittiwatanawong, the Center's director, tells Jiraporn Kuhakan at Reuters.

Still, experts advise caution as the pandemic—and the global response to it—continues to evolve. The future may be especially uncertain for Florida as residents flock back to the coast as the northern hemisphere enters the summer months. And these early nesting trends won't necessarily play out as anomalies over time. "It is possible that the increase in nesting is part of a natural cycle," Jacki Lopez, the director for the Center of Biological Diversity's Florida program, tells Newsweek. "Sea turtles don't nest in the same density or amount every year, it is more cyclical, and depends on the species."

"The complete picture remains to be seen," Lopez adds. "But it does appear that this year's nest season is seeing more activity."