

## GENERAL SEA TURTLE INFORMATION

Every year Emerald Isle is visited by loggerhead sea turtles between May 1 and August 31. The Emerald Isle Sea Turtle Protection Program, with about 80 volunteers, tries to locate and protect the nest sites and help hatchlings return to the surf. Volunteers walk the entire 12.5 miles of the Emerald Isle beach early each morning from May 1 through August 31 looking for evidence that a sea turtle has come ashore during the night to lay her eggs. The 200 – 350 pound turtles leave characteristic crawl marks up to 40 inches in width. The walkers call in their discoveries and Program coordinators immediately go to check for the possible presence of eggs. If visitors see a turtle or tracks left by one, they are asked to call the Emerald Isle Police (252-354-2021) who will immediately notify the volunteers 24/7. The female turtles crawl onto the beaches during the night. The volunteers request that anyone seeing a nesting turtle late at night to please stay back at least 30 feet and not to use any flash cameras, flash lights or cell phone cameras as these frighten the turtles and commonly result in them abandoning the nesting effort. If you want to watch, sit downwind of the turtle and quietly watch....your eyes will become accustomed to the moonlight and you will see an incredible event taking place.

The nest sites are marked off by flagging tape and a large yellow post with the nest number on it. Because these are threatened and endangered species, the Program is not permitted to advertise the exact locations of nests nor the dates of hatching. However, the stakes and flagging are clearly visible along the beach (usually back close to the dunes). The incubation period is anywhere from 50 to 70 days. On about day 50, the volunteers dig a trench about two feet deep and two feet wide, to help guide the hatchlings to the ocean. The flagging is extended along the trench. We ask that you do not disturb these trenching areas...they are not easy to keep up. No one knows when the hatchling will come out of the nest, so once the trench has been dug, volunteers will start sitting at the nest from dusk to around midnight. Hatchling can come out anytime once the sand gets cool and it is quiet. They can hear vibrations in the sand from noise and a lot of movement around the nest. They do not normally emerge during the day because of predators and the extreme heat of the beach sand. Nests have hatched during rain storms because the sand cools and it gets darker. Our trenches will help guide the hatchling toward the ocean if we are not there to help. We do not touch the hatchlings, just guide them to the ocean. A hatchling will go toward the brightest thing they see which is lights on homes, the pier and street lights. At night, crabs will try to get the hatchlings. A hatchling has enough energy to swim for 4-5 days to make it to the Gulf Stream....a distance of 30 to 50 miles.

We do not advertise hatching (because of the Endangered Species Act and also because we do not know). Members of the public are welcome to talk with the volunteers and to sit and wait along with the volunteers. If hatching occurs after dark, we request that there be no flash photography, no flashlight (not even ones with red light) because of potential harm to the hatchlings....it distracts them and they will head toward your light. Three to five days after the first hatchling emerges from a nest site, the volunteers conduct an excavation at the nest – usually 6:30 to 7pm. Everything is dug up so we can count the hatched egg shells, undeveloped eggs, release any hatchlings that are not strong enough to emerge on their own.

We hope this gives you a bit of a picture of our turtle program. We invite anyone wishing to support the program to donate to: The Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Hospital, P.O.Box 3012, Topsail Beach, NC 28445. That facility serves all of the turtle programs along the entire coast. It is also a great place to visit if you want to see recuperating sea turtles. A new facility on the mainland at Topsail will be opening this summer. It will be an incredible place to visit.