

Loggerhead sea turtles: Thriving or declining?

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November 8, 2008

It was a better season in Florida for loggerhead sea turtles, with more nests dug at many beaches than last year.

But coming off a record low count, the increase isn't enough to allay concerns that the marine reptiles may be in trouble, experts said.

"We're hopeful about it, but we need more years to see what the trend is," said Anne Meylan, state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission senior research scientist.

The trends had been very good for the main turtles that lay their eggs in Florida. The two endangered species, green and leatherback sea turtles, have seen a dramatic comeback the past 20 years.

Loggerhead sea turtles, a threatened species, had increasing nest counts through the 1990s. But loggerhead nests have declined since 1998, and many scientists suspect that fishing is to blame.

From a peak of nearly 60,000 nests, the tally plummeted last year to 28,076 at the core beaches tracked for long-term research.

This year's tally of 38,643 does offer hope, but it's too soon to say the turtles are back on the upswing.

"Even taking in this year, there is still strong downward decline at all index beaches over the long term," Meylan said.

Many scientists think the numbers reflect

turtle deaths due to fishing practices that trap the reptiles in trawls or on fishing lines.

Though there's been some progress in reducing turtle deaths, such as a redesign of shrimp trawls to let turtles escape, these changes may have been too late for the juvenile turtles that died years ago and that would be old enough to nest now.

Locally, Volusia had a stellar 617 nests, the second-highest tally for the county. In Brevard, at the Archie Carr refuge, the state's top loggerhead-nesting beach, 9,502 loggerhead nests were found, up from last year's low of 6,405.

Longtime researcher Lew Ehrhart, a senior research fellow at Hubbs- [SeaWorld](#) Research Institute, resists reading too much into these fluctuations.

"The loggerheads' nests are quite variable," Ehrhart said. "I don't think that we have a good enough objective grasp to make much of a declaration of [a] longer-term trend."

This year's total harkens back to the numbers he saw in the 1980s.

"It's hard for me to declare with any confidence this is representative of a serious decline," he said. "I'm not saying the Atlantic loggerhead isn't in decline. It's [just] too soon to say."

Still, environmental groups have asked the federal government to recategorize the turtle from threatened to endangered.

The National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service haven't

decided whether to declare that these loggerheads face a more dire risk.

The federal agencies are waiting for a scientific-review team to assess the turtle trends, but that report isn't expected for several more months.

Elizabeth Griffin, a marine wildlife scientist with the environmental group **Oceana**, thinks the change in status would lead to stronger protections.

Trawlers that catch scallops or weakfish don't use the redesigned nets yet, and the

government could restrict access to some of the more critical habitat for the turtles to prevent fishing-related deaths.

"Endangered-species status would raise the profile of the problem so people take it more seriously," said Griffin. "With the increasing threats these turtles face due to climate change, we need to control the things we can control and protect."

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