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Poachers destroy four sea turtle nests on Sarasota County beaches

Poachers have taken four clutches of sea turtle eggs since June 6 from Sarasota County beaches in Venice and Casey Key, leaving empty nest cavities that were discovered by Mote Marine Laboratory's Sea Turtle Patrol volunteers. All four clutches were laid by loggerhead sea turtles, a threatened species protected by county ordinances, federal and state laws. Officials suspect the eggs were stolen for food or to sell on the black market.

"Poaching has been almost completely unknown in Sarasota County," said biologist Ryan Welsh of Mote's Sea Turtle Conservation and Research Program. "We've had some suspected cases before but they weren't as clear-cut as these recent ones."

Sarasota County beaches host the highest density of nesting loggerheads in the Gulf of Mexico. They are already threatened by entanglement in fishing gear, entrapment in beach furniture left out overnight, disorientation caused by beach lighting, pollution and boat strikes. Poaching poses a new threat.

Mote staff, interns and volunteers monitor nesting activity every day on 35 miles of Sarasota County beaches May through October. They mark nests, deter predators and occasionally move nests in danger of washing away. After finding three nests disturbed and empty in early June, they alerted Mote staff, who confirmed the eggs had likely been stolen and notified local and state authorities. A fourth nest was found to be poached June 11.

"Females lay about 100 eggs in a nest and only one out of 1000 will reach adulthood," Welsh said. "Poaching of nests leaves fewer hatchling turtles to struggle against these odds — fewer chances that one will survive to lay eggs of its own. That means protecting each nest is extremely important."

Possessing sea turtle eggs without a permit carries penalties of as much as one year in prison and federal fines up to \$100,000, along with state fines up to \$500 plus \$100 for every egg taken. But not everyone interacting with a nest is on a poaching mission.

All staff, interns and volunteers in Mote's Sea Turtle Patrol have permission from Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to monitor the nests. They wear special T-shirts bearing the Mote logo and the words, "Sea Turtle Patrol." They have permission to excavate nests and always carry a permit, which they will show if asked.

Sarasota County Environmental Specialist Keri Nelson says it's fine to approach anyone digging a nest and ask to see a permit. "We are dedicated to the conservation of sea turtles throughout Sarasota County, and we encourage beachgoers to report possible poaching activity," said Nelson.

To report someone who appears to be illegally harassing a sea turtle, digging a sea turtle nest or handling sea turtle eggs, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for the Sea Turtle Protection Program. Anonymous calls are accepted.

Media note: A PDF is attached showing the locations of the sea turtle nests that have been disturbed.

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