



Sea Turtle Conservancy

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February 9, 2017

Mayor Mitchell Reeves
Kevin Hogencamp, City Manager
City of Atlantic Beach
800 Seminole Road
Atlantic Beach, FL 32233

Dear Mayor Reeves and Mr. Hogencamp,

We recently learned about a proposal by Louis Catania, a resident of Atlantic Beach, to establish an official city-sponsored website to notify the public when sea turtle nests are expected to emerge. It is our understanding that this proposal is to facilitate the dissemination of this information for the purpose of providing opportunities for the public to view the emergences of sea turtle hatchlings from their nests. While we support the many sanctioned, permitted and highly regulated sea turtle nesting walks around the state, we believe what is being proposed by Mr. Catania is fraught with potential problems, unanswered questions, and serious liability issues.

Encouraging members of the public to gather at nests due to emerge would create a high likelihood sea turtle hatchlings will be disturbed in violation of state and federal laws making it illegal to harm or harass these protected species. Similarly, any adult turtles that may be emerging to nest nearby could also be disturbed. Before moving forward with this proposal we strongly recommend that the City of Atlantic Beach consult more directly with and seek input from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which has the primary jurisdiction over federally protected species and which is the only entity that might authorize the City to engage in an activity such as this which could result in a “take” of sea turtles as described under the federal Endangered Species Act. We also recommend that the City seek the input of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the local Sea Turtle Permit Holder in your area and other stakeholders like the Sea Turtle Conservancy.

STC has serious concerns about whether the scenario being promoted by Mr. Catania could be achieved without causing significant harms to hatchling sea turtles. In this age of social media, it would be impossible to predict, control or regulate the size of any public crowd that happens to show up on the beach in the middle of the night to gather around a sea turtle nest. There is a reason that no similar program exists in any other coastal county or municipality. It would be a very problematic precedent to set and, we believe, would open the City up to direct liability should any sea turtles be harmed through this city-sanctioned program. If this proposal moved forward, we would strongly encourage the city to obtain a federal Incidental Take Permit under the ESA.

Thankfully, Floridians do love sea turtles and insist on their protection and the protection of their nesting habitat. But in a state with 20 million residents and many millions of beach tourists it is essential we maintain a balance between the needs of sea turtles and the desires of the public to interact in close proximity to nesting sea turtles and emerging hatchlings. We are highly skeptical that encouraging the general public to gather around nests in the middle of the night to view an emergence is in the best interests of sea turtles or Floridians. We encourage the city to table this issue and first seek answers to the many questions associated with this proposal.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



David Godfrey
Executive Director



Gary Appelson
Policy Coordinator

cc: Ann Marie Lauritsen, USFWS
Carol Knox, FWCC