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Safeguarding Fla. Sea Turtles; Patrols Try to Keep Coast Clear, Protect Newly Laid Eggs

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Capt. Jeffrey Ardelean uses night-vision goggles to scan the shoreline. A grainy dark blob emerges from the bright whitecaps of the waves and crawls onto the gray sand.

Shrouded in darkness, a loggerhead sea turtle drags her heavy body with her front flippers about 50 feet up on shore. Her body strains each time she drops three or four pinkish-white eggs into the sandy hole. In all, she will leave between 75 and 125 eggs, cover them with sand and lumber back into the sea.

Ardelean's job is to make sure those eggs remain undisturbed until they hatch. He oversees 18 state wildlife investigators who patrol southeastern Florida shores for turtle egg poachers.

"After you watch a turtle go through all that, that's when you get the satisfaction," Ardelean said.

All five species of sea turtles in Florida are protected, and the loggerhead is a threatened species. The stretch of beach where the loggerhead laid her eggs is one of the most poached in Florida. The eggs, considered an aphrodisiac in some Caribbean cultures, are eaten raw or soft-boiled with salt and red pepper.

Nearby are two active black markets for the eggs, one in Riviera Beach and another 5 miles south in West Palm Beach.

The poachers poke a wooden stick or fishing pole into the sand. If the pole comes out sticky with yolk, there is a fresh nest, and the poacher can dig up the eggs, whisk them away in a sack or pillow case and sell them to a dealer for at least 50 cents a piece. The dealer, in turn, can sell them for as much as \$ 4 each.

Under a state law that took effect July 1, poachers caught with 12 or more eggs can be charged with a felony that carries a penalty of as much as five years in prison and \$ 5,000 fine. But Ardelean and his officers have not had a chance to use the new legal tool. Catching a poacher is rare, and wildlife officers, who patrol the beach overnight once a week, usually make only one or two major arrests each summer nesting season.

About 90 percent of the nesting in the United States takes place on the east coast of Florida, said Gary Appelson, advocacy coordinator of the Caribbean Conservation Corporation in Gainesville. Last year 62,905 loggerhead turtles nested in 27 coastal counties in Florida.

But biologists estimate that at most one out of 1,000 sea turtle eggs will hatch and grow to adulthood, most eaten by raccoons and other natural predators.

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During his 30 years of patrols, Ardelean said he has seen raccoons systematically eat the heads off of baby turtles and throw the rest away. It is one of the reasons he patrols the beach to protect them from human predators.

"The turtles just have such a tough time -- everything's trying to eat them," he said.

One weeknight, Ardelean started his patrol by putting fresh batteries in his night-vision goggles, which cost the state \$ 7,000, and setting them in the back seat of the unmarked Chevrolet Lumina next to the other tools of poacher tracking: a flashlight, handcuffs and bug spray.

He drove to the "hot spots," which include a chain link fence topped with barbed wire where poachers often slip onto the beaches of John D. MacArthur Beach State Park and the rear corner of a church parking lot where poachers have pushed down the barbed wire atop another fence that provides quick beach access.

To monitor poacher activity, officers tie threads between the bars and prop sticks against the fence, which will be knocked over and broken to alert the officers when poachers use the entrance.

The night before, the threads were broken at the state park fence, Ardelean said. Poachers were at work.

So far this night, the marked gates were untouched.

He drove to another section of beach and met two of his men on patrol -- investigator Kenneth J. Hanna and Officer Justin R. Allen. They were staking out the sands using night-vision goggles.

Here, every 20 feet the sand was mottled with a wide track from a sea turtle dragging herself ashore. But the only suspicious activity Hanna and Allen observed was a newly hatched sea turtle that nearly ran over Allen's foot on its scurry toward the ocean. Allen helped the silver-dollar sized creature find its bearing.

Winding up their shift around 5 a.m. after about six hours on patrol, Hanna and Allen made one last check of the hot spots. This time, the gate on the barbed-wire fence had been propped open. Two men were on the other side. Nearby was a discarded sack that could hold eggs from two to three nests.

One of the men was well-known to the officers. Broadus Peterkine, also called "Bo Peep," has a prior conviction for poaching 279 turtle eggs in 1980 and another for grand theft auto when he fled wildlife officers who suspected him of poaching in 2000. He served four months in jail under a plea deal.

Peterkine and the other man, Carl Cobb, both of Riviera Beach, told the officers they had planned to go fishing and that they would not have pried open the barbed-wire fence if the gate had been marked with the park hours.

No eggs were found, so officers issued them tickets for being in a state park after hours and accessing a state park through an unauthorized entrance. The charges are misdemeanors, but will require the men to make a court appearance.

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