

Surf, winds wipe out hundreds of Palm Beach, Broward turtle nests

By Rachael Joyner and Dianna Cahn | South Florida Sun-Sentinel
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Turtle eggs dotted the beach in Jupiter on Tuesday, while 50 miles south in Deerfield Beach turtle nesting signs from the north washed up along a jagged shoreline.

These were the leftovers of what were hundreds of turtle nests along the coast of Palm Beach and Broward counties, washed away by intense surf and winds that pounded beaches Sunday and Monday.

"Starting Sunday we've been inundated with calls and people bringing in hatchlings and eggs," said Nanette Lawrenson, executive director of the Loggerhead Marinelife Center in Juno Beach.

Officials are unsure how many sea turtle nests were lost between the two counties — perhaps more than 1,000— but the impact was much less than if the poor weather had come earlier in the nesting season, said Carly DeMaye, senior environmental analyst for Palm Beach County Environmental Resources Management.

"It's not going to dramatically affect them," she said. "It is common to lose nests this late in the season."

Homeowners on Singer Island also felt the devastating power of the high winds and surf, which left waterfront cliffs as high as 15 feet in some places.

In May the county spent \$2 million to restore Singer Island's beach for the second time this year and is still paying off the bill, said Leanne Welch, environmental program supervisor in Palm Beach County's Environmental Resources Management office. The county did similar projects in South Palm Beach and Lantana, which withstood this week's winds better.

Eight feet is all that separates Rita Borraccio's bedroom window from the eroded grass line at her ground-level home at Condado Condominiums on Singer Island.

"It's sad, because as good as [the beach restoration] was as a temporary fix, it is still throwing money down the drain," Borraccio said.

Palm Beach County officials say the plan is to again renourish the beaches, but nothing can happen until the end of turtle nesting season Nov. 1. Peak nesting season is between June and July, and by October most of the nests — which have an average of 80 to 140 eggs — have already hatched, said Kirt Rusenko, marine conservationist and head of Boca Raton's sea turtle program.

He said Boca Raton had about 30 nests left and lost only three.

"We usually lose 60 this time of year, so it is an improvement," Rusenko said.

Other areas were not as fortunate.

The northern part of Palm Beach County, the most popular sea turtle nesting grounds in the county, lost 80 percent of the nests it had left, DeMaye said. The exact number is unknown because parts of the beach were too dangerous to send people to count the nests.

Singer Island lost nearly all of its nests and most of the nests in Jupiter are gone, too, she said.

A 9-mile stretch from Juno Beach to John D. MacArthur State Park, another popular nesting ground, lost 230 — all of its nests waiting to hatch.

"Even though it sounds horrible it has only affected about 5 percent of our nests this season," Lawrenson said.

Officials estimated that there were about 12,500 total nests in Palm Beach and Broward counties this season.

In the northern part of Broward County the winds took a toll, cutting away large swaths of the beach. In some places the waves came up to the dunes.

"Some of the nests got hit hard," said Soozin Lewis, Broward County sea turtle conservation specialist. "In some places there isn't any beach left."

On Sunday there were about 125 nests left in Broward County, mostly in the northern end where the most damage was done. Hillsboro Beach got the worst of the damage. The already narrow shores shrank, with the high-tide line moving up 10 to 15 feet, Lewis said.

"We don't know how many nests were affected by the conditions in the last few days," she said. "Time will tell if the remaining nests hatch or not. It could be a big deal, but we don't know."

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