

**HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN ASSESSMENT  
ST. JOHNS COUNTY, FLORIDA  
2008 ANNUAL REPORT**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On August 6, 2006, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) issued a 20 year Incidental Take Permit (ITP) to St. Johns County, Florida to allow continued public activities and beach driving in a manner that sustains traditional and lawful practices already in place but also in a manner that protects sea turtles and Anastasia Island Beach mouse (AIBM). Issuance of the permit was conditioned upon the County's adherence to a variety of measures to minimize and mitigate the potential for Incidental Take of five species of federally protected sea turtles which utilize County's beaches as nesting habitat and the AIBM which inhabits the beach dunes but may also frequent the beach. As a requirement of an ITP application a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) was submitted that outlined the minimization and mitigation measures. The HCP provides a framework for managing vehicular access and other activities on the County's beaches in a manner and extent compatible with the protection of sea turtles and AIBM.

The 2008 Annual Report was prepared by the HCP Coordinator in conjunction with data obtained from other County departments, Principal Permit Holders (PPHs) and the Beach Lighting Officer. The report summarizes programs, policies and procedures implemented by St. Johns County during 2008 in support of the ITP and HCP. It assesses the effectiveness of these measures, identifies program deficiencies and describes steps that will be taken by the County to further improve HCP performance.

Varying levels of beach driving occur along 16.3 miles of the County's 41.1 miles of shoreline. The 2007 sea turtle nesting season resulted in 284 nests, averaging 55 days of incubation. The 2008 sea turtle nesting season resulted in a total of 298 nests, averaging 60 days of incubation. As the St. Johns County sea turtle nesting trends would predict the loggerhead was the dominant species with 284 nests which accounts for 95% of the total nests in St. Johns County. The remaining 5% of the total nests consisted of 14 green sea turtle nests. A total of 36 nests were deposited on driving beaches (10.6 miles, 17.06 km), 189 nests on non-driving beaches (24.8 miles 39.91 km) and 73 nests on restricted driving beaches (5.7 miles, 9.2 km).

A total of 90,645 daily beach driving passes and 10,604 annual beach driving passes were issued totaling \$995,323.00 in toll sales during the 2008 beach toll collection season which runs from March 1<sup>st</sup> to Labor Day. The policies, procedures and enforcement programs implemented by the County to manage vehicular traffic on County beaches continues to offer challenges as it did in the 2007 nesting season. Being that the implementation of the HCP is only in its second year evaluations of the processes and identification of improvements is expected. For example, although there was an increase in Conservation Zone (CZ) infractions as reported by the Sheriff's department the amount of illegal access and/or vehicles reported on the beaches after hours decreased. With the 2008 nesting season Beach Patrol Officers continued to issue tickets, citations and warnings, as necessary, when possible to deal with observed HCP infractions. During 2008 no sea turtle nests, adult sea turtles or hatchling sea turtles were directly impacted by public driving or other public activity on County Beaches.

St. Johns County sea turtle patrol is based solely on volunteer efforts and is coordinated by eight separate permit holders on 41.1 miles of coastline seven days a week from May 1<sup>st</sup> until approximately mid-September. They did an excellent job of ensuring that all nest sites were appropriately marked, monitored and protected. The 2008 nesting season is the first year in which the approved Standard Sea Turtle Monitoring Protocol (SSTMP) was implemented which proved to be somewhat challenging. Subsequent years should be less challenging. The resulting data that is collected is critical in making beach management decisions and analyzing the effectiveness of the protection measures.

In 1999, the County implemented a Beach Lighting Management Plan (BLMP) on beaches within the County's jurisdiction. The HCP mandated that the BLMP be adopted by the City of St. Augustine Beach, the area in which most hatchling disorientations have occurred. To enforce the BLMP a seasonal Beach Lighting officer patrolled the beaches throughout the sea turtle nesting season. A total of six hatchling disorientations were filed with FWC. Only three incidents were reported to be directly related to non-compliant lights.

The ITP mandates a program to remove ruts seaward of nests approaching hatching. Rut removal procedures were conducted by two HCP Field Assistants. There were no officially reported disorientations as a direct result of lack of rut removal procedures.

Historically the AIBM probably included most of the beaches of St. Johns County. However, as noted in the HCP the current distribution of AIBM is limited to two barrier islands on Anastasia Island and the unnamed barrier island north of the St. Augustine Inlet. On these barrier islands, the AIBM distribution can be further subdivided into four geographical regions – Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve (GTMNERR), Anastasia State Park (ASP), Fort Matanzas National Monument (FMNM) and private and public lands on or near Butler Park and Crescent Beach Park. Signage has been installed indicating the presence of the AIBM on the beach walkovers at the parks mentioned above. Biologists at the GTMNERR and ASP periodically conduct trapping to confirm AIBM populations. The last trapping with recorded AIBM sightings occurred on September 26, 2007 in the GTMNERR. ASP conducted a trapping session from September of 2008 and confirmed 13 animals. The current distribution and known population is lacking along the remainder portions of Anastasia Island.

The HCP is meant to create compatibility between protected species and beach user groups. For the program to work in its entirety, support and understanding from these user groups pertaining to all aspects of the HCP and ITP must be obtained. In addition, the management of County beaches is extremely challenging due to the number and types of activities governed by the HCP. The County must not only coordinate programs within and among numerous County departments, it is also responsible for training and coordinating the activities of outside contractors, commercial fishermen, north beach permittees, horseback riders and groups involved in protected species monitoring. Due to the complexity of the HCP, the diversity of program participants, the scope of activities and the limited staff, it is expected that difficult issues sometimes occur. However, when viewed in its entirety it is seen that the County has effectively implemented the HCP and will continue with this objective.