

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

Introduction

Background

St. Johns County, Florida is responsible for the unified management of 41.1 miles of beaches and approximately 2,400 acres of oceanfront land not under federal jurisdiction (hereinafter County Beaches). This includes beaches in Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve (GTMNERR), Anastasia State Park (ASP), and the beaches within the municipalities of St. Augustine, St. Augustine Beach, and Marineland. The County does not exercise regulatory authority in the State Park nor its municipalities however these areas are included because the County performs beach services and operates safety and/or emergency vehicles in these zones. A vast majority of County beaches consists of sandy beaches with the exception of two inlets and three major regions of oceanfront armoring. The centrally located beaches of St. Johns County are considered by some as ideal for beach driving and other recreational activities because of the wide, flat, hard-packed sands. Beach driving is one of the primary attractions to County beaches in addition to providing numerous recreational and economic opportunities for residents and tourists alike.

The beaches of St. Johns County are recognized as important habitat for protected species including sea turtles and Anastasia Island Beach Mice. Each year between May and September, as many as three species of threatened or endangered sea turtles come ashore on St. Johns County beaches and collectively lay an average of 277 nests. The Anastasia Island Beach Mouse (AIBM) exists exclusively in St. Johns County and is the only mammal endemic to Anastasia Island. AIBM utilizes the same beaches and vegetated dune system to construct and maintain burrows, for food collection and storage and for nesting. Vehicular and the associated lawful activities have potential to impact sensitive dune systems, beach habitat and the federally protected AIBM, nesting marine turtles, nests, and hatchlings, a “taking” prohibited under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.

Varying levels of beach driving occur along 16.3 miles of the County’s shoreline. There are nine vehicular access points to the beach. On the most northern barrier island from north to south they are Usina, Surfside, Vilano and Porpoise Point ramps. On Anastasia Island from north to south they are A Street, Ocean Trace, Dondanville, Matanzas Avenue, Mary Street, Crescent and Fort Matanzas ramps. St. Johns County Ordinance 2007-19 authorizes beach traffic from the southwestern tip of Porpoise Point to the southern boundary of GTMNERR (4.8 miles of which 4.1 miles are restricted to North Beach Vehicular Access Permit Holders) and from Ocean Trace Road to Fort Matanzas Ramp (7.2 miles). There is 1.6 miles of local resident restricted driving on Old A1A right-of-way at Summer Haven south of the Matanzas Inlet. Additionally, St. Augustine

Beach Ordinance No. 97-23 authorizes 1.8 miles of beach driving between A Street ramp and Ocean Trace Road.

After extensive review by County officials of the possible and occurring negative impacts due to beach driving or other recreational activities the County applied to the U.S. and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for an Incidental Take Permit (ITP). As required a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) was provided describing the various programs, policies and measures the County would implement to minimize and mitigate the “take” of listed species. A six year process of assessing the potential impacts, developing alternatives, providing for public comment and finalizing the document resulted in USFWS approving an ITP (TE091980-0) effective August 4, 2006. The issued permit will extend for the duration of 20 years from the effective date.

Per a condition of the ITP the County employed an HCP Coordinator to implement and manage the day-to-day operations of the HCP, coordinate County intra-departmental activities related to HCP implementation and acts as a liaison between Federal, State and County officials. In addition, a Beach Lighting Officer was employed to manage the Beach Lighting Management Plan, County Ordinance 99-33. The Beach Lighting Officer is responsible for patrolling the County coastline nightly during sea turtle nesting season and assessing the coastline for infractions to the Code. St. Johns County’s 41.1 miles of coastline is broken into eight zones by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Marine Turtle Permits. Seven of the zones are patrolled daily throughout the sea turtle nesting season by independent permit holders that volunteer their time throughout the year. Anastasia State Park is patrolled daily by park staff. Throughout the season each permit holder is required to submit sea turtle nesting data to the Growth Management, Environmental Division and at the end of the season to FWC.

Annual Reporting

The purpose of the Annual Report is to assess the effectiveness of measures and programs implemented by the County to minimize and mitigate impacts to protected species. This report summarizes the activities and programs conducted in St. Johns County during the 2008 year in support of the ITP and HCP while assessing their effectiveness. 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.