

**HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN ASSESSMENT
ST. JOHNS COUNTY, FLORIDA
2012 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 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 prepared that outlines minimization and mitigation measures to achieve desired protections. The HCP provides the framework for managing vehicular beach access and other related activities on the County's beaches in a manner and extent compatible with the protection of sea turtles and AIBM.

The 2012 Annual Report was prepared by the Environmental Coordinator in conjunction with data obtained by the Principal Permit Holders (PPHs), Beach Lighting Officer, Beach Enforcement Specialist and the Beach Manager. Administrative review was done by the Director of the Environmental Division and data processing was done by the Environmental Specialist II. The Imperiled Species Section of Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) provided administrative review of Section 3: Standard Sea Turtle Monitoring Protocol. The report summarizes programs, policies and procedures implemented by St. Johns County during 2012 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/ITP performance.

Varying levels of beach driving occur along 16.3 miles of the County's 41.1 miles of shoreline. The 2012 nesting season experienced a 11% increase in nesting from the 627 nests in 2011 bringing the annual average to 303 nests per year. The distribution of the 704 nests by species was 651 loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*), 39 greens (*Chelonia mydas*) and 14 leatherbacks (*Dermochelys coriacea*) producing 53,379 hatchlings with an overall hatchling success rate at 82%, about the same as last year which was at 83%. A total of 61 (9%) nests, 455 (64%) nests on non-driving beaches and 193 (27%) nests on restricted driving beaches were deposited. Each season doesn't go along without its challenges and this year was no different. PPHs reported 11 disorientation events, 110 nests were impacted by both predation and overwash, 41 affected by just predation, and 69 were affected by overwash and tidal inundation.

From March 1st through September, weather depending, the toll operators are collecting toll money for the sale of annual and daily passes. A total of 76,104 daily beach driving passes and 5,536 annual beach driving passes were issued totaling \$873,447.00 in toll sales during the 2012 beach toll collection season. 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 2012. The implementation of the HCP has reached its sixth year and the County has been working diligently to reach compliance by increasing its enforcement capabilities and HCP support staff, improving its levels of communication with PPHs and FWC staff involved in implementation of the Florida Fish and Wildlife sea turtle conservation guidelines. The County is able to spend more time evaluating areas of the HCP that are in need of special attention.

St. Johns County sea turtle patrol is coordinated by eight different permit holders and based solely on volunteer efforts with the exception of park rangers from Anastasia State Park that patrol their beaches and one biologist from Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve that coordinates his own volunteers. They are responsible for patrolling the beaches seven days a week from May 1st until approximately mid-September. Although the Standard Sea Turtle Monitoring Protocol (SSTMP) was updated in 2010 for improvements it is still in its fifth year of implementation. As time progresses along with improved communication from PPHs changes will continue as will improved data collection. The goal is to work in a positive manner and as a team with the PPHs and their volunteers so that we can move forward with the protection of the listed species.

In 1999, the County implemented a Beach Lighting Management Plan (BLMP) on beaches within the County's jurisdiction. To enforce the BLMP the County employed a full time Environmental Technician that performs the duties of the Beach Lighting Officer to patrol the beaches throughout the sea turtle nesting season and to complete inspections on coastal properties. A total of 11 hatchling disorientations and 1 adult disorientation was filed with both FWC and St. Johns County. All were followed up by an investigation by the Environmental Technician with reports to both FWC and the PPHs.

The ITP mandates a program to remove ruts seaward of nests approaching hatching to allow for safe passage to the ocean. Rut removal procedures were conducted and overseen by the Beach Enforcement Specialist, Technician and up to five HCP Field Assistants throughout the summer months from June to November. Rut removal procedures started on June 16th and concluded on October 16th for a period of 106 days on 115 nests; 113 Loggerheads and 2 Green. The longest period in which rut removal staff spent removing ruts on a nest was 37 days and the shortest amount of time was 10 days with only 4 nests being reported as missed by staff due to evening weather systems.

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 for years to come.