

**HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN ASSESSMENT
ST. JOHNS COUNTY, FLORIDA
2012 ANNUAL REPORT**

Introduction

Background

St. Johns County, Florida is located on the northeast coast of Florida, approximately midway between Cape Canaveral and the Florida-Georgia State Line. It is bounded on the north by Duval County and on the south by Flagler County. St. Johns County Board of County Commissioners 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 (Map Figure 1). The County does not exercise regulatory authority in the ASP, GTMNERR or the municipalities. However, these beaches are included in the Plan Area because driving occurs while the County and State officials conduct daily activities such as public safety, emergency, and wildlife response. In 2007 shortly after the approval of the HCP the City of St. Augustine Beach adopted County Ordinance 2007-19 and County Ordinance 99-33. This allowed both St. Johns County Beach Services and the Sheriff's Department to enforce the rules and regulations of the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) and Incidental Take Permit (ITP). St. Johns County beaches encompass a full spectrum of beach conditions including sandy, coquina, accreting and eroding beaches with approximately 18% of St. Johns County beaches classified by the State of Florida as "critically eroded" (FDEP 2002). There are also two inlets, the St. Augustine and Matanzas inlet, and three major regions of oceanfront armoring.

The centrally located beaches of St. Augustine beaches are considered by some 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, numerous recreational and economic opportunities are provided for residents and tourists alike. During the application process the St. Johns County HCP evaluated these different user groups, the versatile beach activities, and the needs of coastal wildlife to develop a beach management strategy that benefits all users.

The beaches of St. Johns County are also recognized as important habitat for protected species including sea turtles and Anastasia Island beach mice (AIBM). Each year between May and September, as many as three species of threatened or endangered sea turtles come ashore and collectively lay an average of 322 nests. The AIBM exists exclusively in St. Johns County and is the only mammal endemic to Anastasia Island. AIBM utilize the vegetated dune systems for food foraging consisting primarily of sea oats, for habitat to construct and maintain their burrows, and nesting. Beach driving and associated lawful activities have the potential to negatively impact sensitive dune systems, beach habitat, the federally protected AIBM, nesting marine turtles, nests, and hatchlings. Collectively this would be considered as a "taking" and is prohibited under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.

There are nine vehicular access points to the beach allowing access to varying levels of beach driving along 16.3 miles of the County's shoreline. On the most northern unnamed barrier island access points from north to south are Usina, Surfside Avenue, Vilano Road and Genoa Road (Porpoise Point). On Anastasia Island from north to south the access points are A Street, Ocean Trace Road, Dondanville Road, Matanzas Avenue, Mary Street, Cubbedge Road (Crescent Beach access) and Fort Matanzas National Monument ramp. The St. Johns County Beach Code, 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 National Monument ramp (7.2 miles). Historically there was 1.6 miles of local resident restricted driving on Old A1A right-of-way at Summer Haven south of the Matanzas Inlet. This is no longer a viable route for residents to access their homes. They are confined to a sand road located behind the homes halfway down the strip of Summer Haven. Finally, the City of St. Augustine Beach Ordinance No. 97-23 authorizes 1.8 miles of beach driving between A Street ramp and Ocean Trace Road ramp.

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 ITP. As required, a 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 ITP (TE091980-0) effective August 4, 2006. The issued permit will extend for the duration of 20 years from the effective date.

Under the direction of the Growth Management Department's Environmental Division the Habitat Conservation Section was formed creating three full time staff solely dedicated to the implementation of the HCP. Full time staff members include the Environmental Coordinator, Environmental Specialist II, and Environmental Technician, also referred to as the Beach Lighting Officer and two part time seasonal employees that serve as a Beach Lighting Assistant and Assistant Volunteer Coordinator. As well, through the Recreation and Parks Department, the Division of Beach Services provides support staff to assist with HCP implementation and enforcement. Full time year round employees include the Beach Manager, Beach Enforcement Specialist and part time seasonal staff include the Beach Enforcement Technician, Volunteer Coordinator and several HCP Field Assistants.

The Board of County Commissioners gave approval in September 2009 to assign three full time Sheriff's deputies referred to as by Natural Resource Deputies (NRDs) to the beach and including additional supplemental over time hours for busy holidays and weekends. They participate in extensive HCP, Protected Species, marine mammal and sea turtle stranding training. They are under the direct supervision of the Sheriff's Department Beach Law Enforcement Coordinator and work closely with the Environmental Coordinator and Beach Manager for daily and long term duties.

Marine Turtle Permit Program

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 Permit program. Six of the zones are patrolled daily throughout the sea turtle nesting season by independent Principal Permit Holders (PPH) that along with their volunteers donate their time throughout the year. Both ASP and GTMNERR considered as the seventh and eighth zone for this descriptive purpose only are patrolled by both park staff and volunteers. Each permit holder has agreed to coordinate with a Standard Sea Turtle Monitoring Protocol (Appendix A) that was created with both the FWC and USFWS. PPHs, volunteers, and park staff are asked to complete daily nesting surveys and nesting data sheets. More information on this protocol can be found in Section 3: Standard Sea Turtle Monitoring Protocol. This protocol also asks that PPHs provide weekly submissions of sea turtle nesting data through an online data collection process. Nesting data sheets are collected at the end of the season and inputted into the County's database in which the data is evaluated and provided in this report.

Annual Reporting

The purpose of the Annual Report is to assess the effectiveness of programs implemented by the County to minimize and mitigate impacts associated with beach driving on protected species. This report summarizes the activities and programs conducted in St. Johns County during the 2012 year in support of the ITP and HCP while assessing their effectiveness. The 2012 Annual Report was prepared by the Environmental Coordinator with assistance from the Environmental Division Director, Beach Manager, Environmental Specialist II, Environmental Technician, Beach Lighting Officer, the County's Geographical Information Systems Department and in conjunction with data obtained from other County departments, and the PPHs. All data collected is mainly processed by the Environmental Specialist II, with supporting development from the Environmental Technician and Beach Enforcement Specialist. Completed data is evaluated by the Environmental Coordinator and Director of the Environmental Division.