



**St. Johns County
Environmental Division
Habitat Conservation Section**

**Standard Monitoring Plan for
Nesting and Hatching Sea Turtles**

Version III April of 2015

Introduction: The coastal Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) developed by St. Johns County (SJC), and the resulting Incidental Take Permit (ITP) issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on August 4, 2006, include requirements to develop a Sea Turtle Nest Monitoring Plan (Plan). Those documents further require that SJC develop the Plan in coordination and consultation with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and its authorized Marine Turtle Principle Permit Holders (MTPs). The USFWS must approve the Plan prior to its implementation. Plan procedures must conform to the current FWC Marine Turtle Conservation Guidelines (<http://www.myfwc.com/seaturtle/Guidelines/Guidelines.PDF>), and may be modified or amended if needed, to conform to any future changes to those guidelines. The HCP and ITP stipulate that Plan adjustments are to be made through the modification and amendment process described in Section 11.K. 1-3 of the ITP.

Purpose: This Plan is intended to provide standardized guidance to sea turtle monitoring personnel involved in the surveying and reporting of nesting and hatching activities within the coastal beaches of St. Johns County, Florida. Sea turtle monitoring personnel within SJC are defined as those authorized by FWC under its sea turtle permit program. Mutual cooperation, coordination, and commitment among SJC and sea turtle permitting and monitoring personnel are essential to achieving consistent and successful plan implementation.

Required Authorizations and Display Format

- Sea turtle monitoring personnel are authorized by FWC to conduct marine turtle monitoring within SJC. All sea turtle monitoring personnel working within SJC must have current Marine Turtle Permit authorizations prior to the beginning of each sea turtle nesting season as well as copies of any amendments during the year.
- MTPs and other sea turtle monitoring personnel authorized to conduct sea turtle monitoring in St. Johns County must participate in HCP training as described in the “Training” section of this document.
- All operation of motorized vehicles as part of work authorized under a FWC Marine Turtle Permit must first obtain the appropriate beach driving and parking permits from SJC, after having completed HCP training.
- Annual beach driving and parking permits must be placed on the dashboard of vehicles for the purpose of parking on the beach and within the County Right of Way, while conducting official and authorized sea turtle nesting activities. If All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) are utilized for patrol, permits must be stored within interior compartments of the equipment.
- Sea turtle monitoring personnel must at all times carry a copy of the FWC marine turtle permit, HCP beach driving/parking permit, and personal identification while conducting authorized activities.

- While conducting official duties monitoring personnel display the organizations name and/or logo in an obvious location on vehicle, ATV, or clothing.

Training

Successful implementation of the HCP requires coordination, teamwork, and consistency by all involved in marine turtle protection in the County. This can be facilitated through annual HCP and Protected Species Training. MTPs and those sea turtle monitoring personnel listed on the Marine Turtle Permit are required to complete this training prior to each nesting season. The training will include HCP and/or ITP updates, and any other information SJC deems necessary for successful implementation of the HCP, and compliance with the ITP. The MTPs are responsible for ensuring that all other sea turtle monitoring personnel listed on the current Marine Turtle Permit conduct their activities in accordance with this training. Training may be achieved through one of two formats as follows:

- All sea turtle monitoring personnel can access an online training module available at <http://www.sjcfl.us/HCP/Volunteer.aspx>.
- SJC will upon request from an MTP provide the annual training to all sea turtle monitoring personnel in a classroom-like setting.

Vehicle Operation

- Prior to beach gate openings vehicles should be driven below the high tide line. During regular beach driving hours comply with directions of travel.
- Obey speed limit of 10 miles per hour.
- Maintain a 15' buffer between dune vegetation and sea turtle nests.
- Operate vehicle on the seaward side of sea turtle nests.
- Avoid disturbing shorebirds and seabirds to the maximum extent possible.
- Avoid making sharp turns and leaving ruts.
- For the purpose of operating an ATV maintain tire pressure at less than 5 psi.

Data Management

- MTP's have the option to utilize SJC HCP nesting data sheets (Attachment A) or provide in digital format the following data that records sea turtle nesting activities and impacts: Survey date, nest id#, species, observer, FWC survey beach name, type of crawl (nest or false crawl), GPS coordinates of crawl (in dd.ddddd format), descriptive location of crawl, nest or apex of crawl, obstacles encountered, relocation data (including date, cause, and GPS coordinates in dd.ddddd), impacts to turtles and/or nests by vehicles (including hatchling/rut interactions), horses, predators and humans, and reproductive success for a representative sample of marked nests as coordinated with FWC.
- Retain daily data sheets or provide in a digital summary the seasonal nesting activity and submit to SJC by, or at, the annual end-of-season SJC Marine Turtle Permit Holder's Roundtable Discussion.
- To assure timely rut removal, MTPs shall report scheduled events such as the date of an evaluation, or the date in which the stakes are scheduled to be removed, to the Environmental Supervisor no later than the morning of the scheduled event. If the

- removal of stakes and/or evaluation occurs unexpectedly, MTPs shall report the circumstance to the Environmental Supervisor no later than the morning after the event.
- Transfer daily nesting data to the weekly online reporting system located at <http://www.sjcfl.us/HCP/Volunteer.aspx>, using the SJC smartphone application, or submit summary in digital format on a weekly basis by 5:00 pm each Monday:
 - Required weekly data includes the following: Survey date, nest id #, species, observer, survey beach name, type of crawl, GPS coordinates of crawl (in dd.ddddd format), and descriptive location of crawl.
 - MTPs upon identification of a disorientation event shall report the event to the HCP Environmental Supervisor on the day of the observed event, using the FWC disorientation report form (Attachment B). This will allow the SJC Beach Lighting Officer to immediately conduct a follow up investigation of the disorientation event. The SJC investigation report will be submitted to the MTP the following day. (Please note, all disorientation reports should also continue to be submitted to FWC via SeaTurtleLighting@MyFWC.com as required by that agency).
 - Upon observation of lighting violations, MTPs shall notify the SJC Beach Lighting Officer either via email (TBD) or phone call (904-209-0331), providing location, description of light and return contact information.

All Attachments can be found at <http://www.sjcfl.us/HCP/Volunteer.aspx>.

Nest Monitoring

- Conspicuously mark and barricade all nests deposited on SJC beaches with bright flagging tape, and FWC-issued yellow sea turtle signage. To reduce the potential for impacts to the nest, the following procedures have been developed as part of the St. Johns County HCP:
 - Mark nests on high-use beaches that permit driving and horseback with 4 wooden stakes.
 - Mark nests on medium to low use beaches that permit only horseback riding or have no other permitted uses except pedestrians with 3 wooden stakes.
 - Nest identification markings should include the date (when the nest was first observed), nest number, and species code (i.e. Loggerhead = Cc, Green = Cm, and Leatherback = Dc). MTPs may decide to utilize a coded version of the date; if so, please provide the code to SJC prior to nesting season.
- Driving beaches
 - To ensure that all nests are properly located and marked for protection prior to the opening of vehicular beach driving at 8:00 am, MTPs and their authorized personnel shall complete daily nesting surveys by 8:00 am each morning between May 1 and September 30 (or after last nest has emerged).
 - If the daily nesting survey on a driving beach is not completed by 8:00 am, the MTP shall contact the Environmental Supervisor by phone or text not later than 7:45 am so that the beach opening to vehicular traffic can be delayed until completion of the morning survey.
 - SJC staff shall apply reflective numbers to nest stakes on driving beaches where routine rut removal procedures are required.
 - To ensure protection of nests within designated traffic lanes, the MTP shall notify the SJC Environmental Supervisor immediately of such nesting in order

for SJC Environmental Supervisor immediately of such nesting in order for SJC to be given an opportunity to surround the nest with bright green cones as an additional barricade.

- Non-driving beaches:
 - Daily nesting surveys on these beaches are completed by 9:00 am each morning between May 1 and September 30 (or after last nest has emerged).
- Special event applications will be coordinated through SJC Beach Services and Habitat Conservation Sections, any special permission (i.e. early set up time) can be granted to a special event permit recipient after discussions with MTPs.
 - SJC staff will be on site during large events to ensure compliance with approved special event permit conditions.

St. Johns County will provide the following necessary materials to carry out official sea turtle monitoring and staking responsibilities per the Plan:

- Field Data Sheets on rite-in-the-rain paper
- Notebook for holding data sheets
- Service of making copies of data sheets
- Brightly-colored Flagging tape
- Painted wooden stakes
- GPS units and batteries
- Digital Camera, holding case and rechargeable battery
- Laminated maps of each zone with landmarks, addresses, and beach access points