

Sea turtles set new nesting records in US

September 7 2015, by Russ Bynum

Sea turtle experts along the southeastern U.S. coast say new nesting numbers reinforce their belief that loggerhead sea turtles are making a comeback after 37 years of protection as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The high numbers bode well for [conservation efforts](#) put in place to aid a species that was nearly extinct in the 1980s. Researchers say sea turtles rebounded from a slump last year to deliver one of the strongest summer nesting seasons on record on beaches from the Carolinas to Florida.

Preliminary numbers from Georgia show scientists and volunteers counted a record 2,292 loggerhead sea turtles nests during the season that runs from May through August. It's the fifth season in six years that Georgia, which has just 100 miles (160 kilometers) of coastline, has surpassed its previous record.

"Every big year we get, the more confident we are in that conclusion that we're in a recovery period," said Mark Dodd, the biologist who heads the sea turtle recovery program for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. "So we feel really good about it."

In Florida, where the nesting season doesn't end until October, turtles are also breaking records. More than 12,000 endangered green sea turtles have dug nests along the beach at the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, said Kate Mansfield, head of the Marine Turtle Research Group at the University of Central Florida. It's a new record for the refuge.

Mansfield said these same Florida beaches had fewer than 50 green sea turtle nests annually in the 1980s.

Still, Mansfield says turtles need to live 25 or more years before they start to reproduce, so it will be decades before researchers know for certain if current nesting trends are signs of long-lasting recovery.

Loggerhead sea turtles, which grow to weigh up to 300 pounds (135 kilograms), dig their nests on beaches from the Carolinas to Florida. Preliminary nesting numbers show a strong nesting comeback in both North Carolina and South Carolina this summer after numbers dropped by nearly half in 2014. Georgia suffered a similar slump last year, with nest numbers dipping to 1,201.

Dodd and other experts weren't alarmed, noting that female loggerheads don't lay eggs every year and sometimes take two or even three years off from nesting.

Researchers have credited two specific conservation efforts with helping the species rebound. Turtle nests discovered by government experts and volunteers on state beaches get covered with a mesh that protects the eggs inside from hogs, raccoons and other predators.

Also, shrimp boats trawling in U.S. waters have been required since 1987 to use fishing nets equipped with special trapdoors that allow [sea turtles](#) to escape.

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