

Girls donate allowance to aid sea turtles

BY LAURA LEWIS

STAFF WRITER

Carmel Zetts was wrapping up her weekly sea turtle talk when two little girls stepped forward from the crowd gathered on Sunset Beach.

Cousins Emily Grover-McNitt, 8, and Amanda Ligon, 10, then handed Zetts a small, paper gift bag.

Peeking inside, Zetts saw lots of money and change. That, combined with an additional check from the girls, amounted to all the allowance, tooth-fair, and gift money they'd been saving for the past year—a total of \$125.73, to be exact—to help the sea turtles.

"It was a very big surprise, and to think that they would give up their allowance, that was really touching," said Zetts, coordinator of the local sea turtle program, relating how she met the girls last Sunday night, June 27.

Emily is a rising third-grader who lives with her family in Santa Fe, N.M. Amanda, who starts fifth-grade this year, is from Matthews.

Each summer, they and their families converge in Sunset Beach for a vacation and reunion.

"We heard the turtle talk last year, and we just kind of thought maybe we could help," Amanda said, sitting with her cousin and their moms, Karen Ligon and Elizabeth McNitt, on an oceanfront porch last week. "And it just kind of went on from there."

They've been saving their money ever since, up until they presented the gift bag to Zetts following her free program that takes place at 7 p.m. Sundays during the summer in the Sunset Beach Pier parking lot.

The donation amounts to the bulk of the girls' combined savings, except for a smaller, earmarked amount.



PHOTO BY MIKE MARKATOS

Emily Grover-McNitt, 8, and her cousin, Amanda Ligon, 10, pose with their new 'Help Save Sea Turtles' T-shirts June 27 after donating all the money they've saved in the past year to the Sunset Beach turtle program. Pictured with them from left are Darlene Kennedy, captain of volunteers for the Bird Island turtle program, Lynn Eriquez, captain of the Sunset Beach east end program, and program coordinator Carmel Zetts.

"We used \$20 of it to buy stuff," said Emily, referring to their new "Help Save Sea Turtles" T-shirts and tiny plastic sea turtles they bought to benefit the program.

"It all goes to the turtles," she added.

Zetts said the donation will be used for education and to buy the sea-turtle materials that are always needed, such as wooden stakes, wire and ribbon to mark their nesting spots on the beach and batteries for baby-turtle lights.

"The state gives us some [funding], but we never have enough," Zetts said.

In addition, "We need to educate people at the beach," Zetts said.

The weekly program is designed to do that.

"A lot of people don't know that the beach is a turtle sanctuary, so we give the program and explain what happens," Zetts said.

The program, which consists of about 50 volunteers, also provides copies of a flyer for visitors of all ages to take home and color "to remember what goes on on the beach," Zetts said.

It costs \$250 to produce

1,000 of those. On any given school visit, she easily will distribute 100. So a batch of flyers, which cost 3 cents apiece to produce, lasts about a month, if they're lucky.

"We run our whole program on donations, so the more donations we get, the more information we can give out," she said.

Any money left over from the girls' donation will be given to the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center in Topsail Beach, Zetts said.

Both Emily and Amanda said they would someday like to pursue careers in animal-related fields.

Emily said she'd like to be a veterinarian, while Amanda is considering a similar avenue.

"I kind of want to be someone who works with animals, like maybe a marine biologist who works with dolphins and sea animals," she said.

They wanted to donate their money to sea turtles because "they may become extinct," Amanda said. "It's just another one of God's creatures. Maybe people will see this and think if two kids can do it, they can do it."