

Spotlight on

NEIGHBORS

Brunswick County

Program watches over turtles

BY JO ANN MATHEWS
For The Sun News

Carmel Zetts knows loggerhead turtles and wants others to understand the importance of guarding their nests and guiding the hatchlings into the ocean. As coordinator of Sunset Beach, N.C., Turtle Watch, Zetts presented an informative program June 11 to about 100 people, primarily vacationers, who listened with interest as she encouraged people to protect the turtles.

A lot of people didn't know Sunset Beach is a sea-nesting beach, Zetts said. As a result, Turtle Watch began giving programs six years ago.

She explained that nesting season begins May 1 and runs through August and sometimes into September. The females come from the ocean, find dry sand and dig a hole for their eggs. A female may deposit 50 to 200 eggs. She fills the hole and smooths the sand to camouflage the site.

It takes from 55 to 90 days for the eggs, a little bigger than ping-pong balls, to hatch. The hotter the season, the faster the hatching. So far this season, Turtle Watch volunteers found one nest with 165 eggs. However, only one hatched turtle in 1,000 ever reaches adulthood.

People must realize that they shouldn't bother a sea turtle who comes to nest. They shouldn't use a flashlight to see one or use flash photography. It might frighten the turtle, which then doesn't nest. However, after nesting, which may take two to 2½ hours, it's acceptable to walk the turtle back to the ocean.

Sunset Beach Turtle Watch volunteers walk the 3-mile beach at 5:30 or 6 a.m. to look for nests. If a turtle came during the night, deep tracks are apparent in the sand. Volunteers follow the tracks coming from the water to



PHOTOS BY JO ANN MATHEWS For The Sun News

(Above) Beth Wesson (left) of Hendersonville, N.C., holds Scratchy, the Sunset Beach, N.C., Turtle Watch mascot, while its caretaker, Doug Hill, (wearing hat) leads children in the turtle dance. (Below) A turtle shell rests against the display where children gather to look at pictures of turtles.



Turtle programs

► Sunset Beach, N.C.

When | 7 p.m. Sundays, after the 7 p.m. sky show
Wednesdays

Where | Sundays, Sunset Properties, 419 Sunset Blvd.;
Wednesdays, Ingram Planetarium, 7625 High Market St.

Cost | Sundays, free;
Wednesdays, adults \$5, children \$3

Contact | (910) 5862 or (910) 575-0033

► Ocean Isle Beach, N.C.

When | 7 p.m. Mondays and Tuesdays

Where | Museum of Coastal Carolina, 21 E. Second St.

Cost | adults \$5, children \$3
Contact | (910) 579-1016

► Holden Beach, N.C.

When | 7 p.m. Wednesdays
Where | Holden Beach Chapel, 107 Rothschild St.

Cost | Free

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where the mother made her nest. They put wire around it to protect it from predators. "We sit with the nest while it hatches," Zetts said.

When the hatchlings are ready to go to the water, the volunteers dig a trench so the new turtles find their way to the water. Volunteers also encourage children to name the turtles heading to sea.

Beachgoers must also realize that trash can hurt the turtles.

"They eat jellyfish but can't tell the difference between plastic and jellyfish," Zetts said. "They are such a wonderful creature," she added. "Once you see a hatching, you're hooked."

"If anyone asks me to look for animals, I'll do it," said Timothy Martin, 9, of Cold Spring, Ky., who was vacationing with his family. "I love animals."



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The Pierett family from Lebanon, Ohio, attend the Turtle Watch program at Sunset Beach, N.C. Nick Pierett, 3, (left) shows the miniature plastic turtle he got. His brother, Alex Pierett, 5, shows one plastic turtle to his dad, Mark Pierett, who holds Catherine Pierett, 10 months, and a bag of them to his mom, Christina Pierett.

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