

Loggerhead, Green, Kemp's Ridley, and Leatherback Sea Turtles

Status

Four species of sea turtles occur in the nearshore GOM waters off Tyndall AFB. These species include the loggerhead, green, Kemp's ridley, and leatherback sea turtles. The loggerhead is threatened, while the green, Kemp's ridley, and leatherback are endangered (NMFS and USFWS, 1991; NMFS and USFWS, 1992; NMFS and USFWS, 2008; NMFS, USFWS, and Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2011). The loggerhead is the most common of the four species and it nests every year on Tyndall's beaches, including Shell Island, 9 CIE, and CIW and sporadically on Buck Beach. There is occasional nesting by leatherback and 10 green sea turtles, and suspected but unconfirmed nesting by Kemp's ridley sea turtles. The peak nesting period is June and July, with an average of 50 nests per year.

Monitoring

The USFWS delegated the authority and responsibility for monitoring sea turtle nesting and hatching to the State; therefore, Tyndall maintains appropriate permits with the State for these activities. Tyndall must conduct surveys and monitoring IAW the specific protocols detailed in the State permit. Tyndall Natural Resources conducts early morning sea turtle surveys five times per week on 18 miles (29 km) of Shell Island, CIE and CIW from May 15 to August 31. These surveys are intended to locate the crawls of nesting female turtles, determine the species, determine whether the crawl is a nesting crawl or a false crawl, place protective screening over the nest to deter predators, and mark the nest location. Nests are checked three times per week from September through November, or until the last nest hatches for potential storm damage, hatching activity, and predation. The objective of the sea turtle monitoring program is to provide location information (for mission avoidance) and annual data on the distribution and abundance of sea turtle nesting activity on Tyndall's beaches. Additional information on monitoring is available in the T&E Plan.

Management

The primary goal of sea turtle management on Tyndall AFB is to provide the highest level of capability and flexibility to the military operations while meeting the legal requirements of the ESA. The main role Natural Resources plays in the management and conservation of sea turtles is to locate, mark, and protect sea turtle nests; assess potential impacts to sea turtles from proposed mission activity; recommend conservation measures to avoid impacts to nesting sea turtles, their nests, and emerging hatchlings; and relocate turtle nests only if necessary and under certain permitted conditions.

In addition to the actions identified above, Tyndall implements the following management measures:

- Predator control with USDA Wildlife Services personnel
- Prohibition of lights (FWC, 2011), fires, and camping on beaches
- Avoidance of off-road vehicle use during nesting season
- Enhancement and restoration of dune habitat

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