

VELADOR

Science-Based Sea Turtle Conservation Since 1959

Issue 1, 2015

The Sea Turtle License Plate: Creating a Better Future for Florida's Sea Turtles for Twenty Years



Eve Haverfield

It's been 20 years since Sea Turtle Conservancy led the successful campaign to create a sea turtle license plate in Florida. After meeting the requirements to create a new specialty tag and crafting legislation delineating how funds would be used, STC worked with the Florida Legislature to gain near-unanimous approval for the turtle tag during the 1997 Legislative Session. Now, two decades later, the Helping Sea Turtles Survive license

plate is the second highest selling specialty plate in the state (behind just the University of Florida tag) and the top selling environmental plate. It's almost impossible to drive on Florida's roads without catching a glimpse of the now iconic ocean blue and sand-colored plate featuring a loggerhead hatchling crawling toward the surf. But the sea turtle tag has done more than just turn a few heads.

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Florida Update: Stewardship at the BIC



Adopted Turtles seen in Tortuguero during 2014 season

Classroom Spotlight

The 6th grade class at Friedman Middle School in Massachusetts is bringing sea turtles to their classroom, virtually! Eleven classes, totaling approximately 285 students, raised enough money to adopt each of the 2014 Tour de Turtles turtle competitors and compete in their own race to learn the most about sea turtles.

Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC) sat down with teacher Maria Curley who organized the fundraising initiative and lesson plan and whose class adopted the winning sea turtle Panama Jack to ask some questions:



What sparked your interest in sea turtle conservation and why did you choose to bring it into your classroom?

* I have always been interested in marine turtles but was extremely moved to help in their conservation after visiting the nesting beaches at Tortuguero National Park in Costa Rica this past summer. Two summers ago, I and a group of teachers and administrators from the US and Costa Rica visited Ostional on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica and unfortunately missed the Arribada (the mass nesting by Kemp's and olive ridley turtles) by a couple of weeks. This past summer was a different story. We were extremely fortunate that our guide included the Caribbean side in our trip around the country, and we were able to see two green turtles nesting in Tortuguero, where STC conducts the longest-running sea turtle conservation program in the world. This was an amazing and life changing experience for me and all the students. Hearing the presentation by STC's staff at Tortuguero about each species, the threats to their survival, and the ongoing education and community outreach efforts being done at this and other nesting locations around the world, inspired me to bring back the information we learned and share it with our students in Massachusetts.

Do you feel your students have benefitted from learning about sea turtles?

* Absolutely. Many of the students knew of a couple of the marine turtle species, but were amazed at their varied diets, how changes in the marine ecosystems affect them, and the many threats they face throughout their life—many of which are caused by humans. Learning about these very real issues that face marine turtles caused many students to realize the impact of human activities. The students developed a virtual bond with the turtles and were always so excited when we could check on them to see where they were out in the ocean after they left their nesting locations. It truly has been an ongoing educational process this whole school year.

Since you are not located near a nesting beach, how have you been able to demonstrate the importance of sea turtles to your students?

* The transmitters and the ability to see each turtle's location on the world map was essential to our education efforts. Technology like this is amazing because we can be in one part of the world, here in the Northeast, looking at turtles in the waters off Central America or in the Gulf of Mexico! This shows students

VELADOR {bel.a.dor}

In Caribbean cultures, **Velador** translates as "one who stands vigil"—referring to turtle hunters who waited at night for turtles to come ashore. Now STC claims this title for its newsletter, and around the world STC's researchers and volunteers are replacing poachers as the new veladors. The **Velador** is published for Members and supporters of the nonprofit **Sea Turtle Conservancy**. STC is dedicated to the conservation of sea turtles through research, advocacy, education and protection of the habitats upon which they depend.

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what an inter-connected world we live in. These education efforts also enhanced the program taught by the Grade 6 Social Studies teachers—World Geography, which includes Central and South America. Map skills and knowing where things are in the world, including other animal species besides humans, are very important for students.

I think this fundraising and education effort really helped the students not only locate the turtles on a world map, but learn about the process of turtles nesting, the human-environment impact on them, and the importance of everyone getting involved to protect species like marine turtles from becoming extinct. Drastic or gradual events or changes in the marine ecosystem affect all marine species in some way, including turtles, whether it is ocean acidification, warming oceans, oil spills, or plastic bags. Knowing this made students realize that if we don't act now and do things like protect nesting beaches, educate others, and recycle our garbage instead of dumping it into the world's oceans, marine turtles could too be added to the already long list of extinct species.

Why did you decide to fundraise for STC by adopting sea turtles as opposed to just teaching on the subject?

* In my opinion, fundraising and contributing toward a cause gives students ownership in not only just knowing about the problem but also being a part of the solution. To educate and learn about something

is one thing, but to act and do even some small part to help in the conservation and protection of endangered species is much more impactful. I truly feel it made a great impact on the students and got them excited about our marine ecosystems as well as showing the fragility of these systems. As a result, several of the students are interested in marine biology as a possible future career path, so this was great information for those who may be working with marine animals and ecosystems one day.

Do you have any plans to utilize the free distance learning programs offered by STC?

* Not this year, but it sounds like an amazing program and we definitely will consider accessing it next year.

If you are interested in adopting a sea turtle for yourself or your classroom please visit conserveturtles.org and click on "Adopt" or you can contact STC Membership Coordinator Becca Gelwicks directly at becca@conserveturtles.org.

If you are interested in a FREE distance learning program with an STC turtle expert please contact Dan Evans at dan@conserveturtles.org 

By Becca Gelwicks
Membership Coordinator

... from cover

In the mid-90s, Florida's fledgling Marine Turtle Protection Program was fighting for survival. The state program had no dedicated funding source and was scraping by on bare-minimum annual appropriations and small grants from another wildlife agency. As a result, sea turtle research, recovery and regulatory efforts in Florida were at risk.

When STC executive director David Godfrey first started with the organization in 1993, at that time running STC's Florida programs, his first major initiative was to launch the campaign to establish the turtle tag.

"The first thing I did after starting with STC was to travel around Florida meeting with people involved in sea turtle protection to learn about the greatest threats facing these species in the state," Godfrey said. "I found one of the biggest challenges at the time was a lack of reliable funding for the State's marine turtle regulatory program. I looked around and saw how successful the manatee tag was and thought to myself there's no reason we can't have a sea turtle tag too."

In 1994, STC partnered with sea turtle groups and advocates across Florida to launch a statewide campaign to create the sea turtle specialty license plate, which would establish a much-needed permanent source of funding for sea turtle regulatory programs. STC spent two years carrying out a petition drive to collect the required 10,000 signatures from Florida vehicle owners who pledged to purchase the new tag once it became available. Godfrey worked with an artist from New York, Elane Eckert, to come up with a catchy design for the tag, and STC developed a long-term marketing plan to build broad support for the tag. The final requirement for establishing a new specialty tag was a \$30,000 application fee that had to be paid to the Department of Motor Vehicles to cover the initial costs of printing the tag. The full amount of the fee was loaned to STC, interest free, by an anonymous member of Florida's volunteer sea turtle community (the loan has since been paid back in full through donations from turtle groups and volunteers all over Florida).



Governor Lawton Chiles signs the bill establishing the Sea Turtle License Plate at a signing ceremony in 1997. STC executive director David Godfrey stands just behind the governor with members of the legislature who sponsored the bill.

The Helping Sea Turtles Survive specialty license plate became official in 1997, when it was passed with overwhelming support of the Florida Legislature. The tag was approved by a 35-0 vote in the Senate and a 116-3 vote in the House of Representatives. The final bill was signed by Governor Lawton Chiles at a ceremony held next to the sea turtle tanks at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium.

"One of the most unique aspects of Florida's turtle tag," said Godfrey, "is that it was established by STC with the support of other citizen groups in order to create a permanent funding source for a government program."

Today, revenue generated by the sea turtle tag stretches a long way. Seventy percent of the plate's proceeds serve as the primary source of funding for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Marine Turtle Protection Program (MTPP). The remaining funds are routed through STC, which distributes funding annually through the Sea Turtle Grants Program (STGP). The program dispenses about \$300,000 in grants every year to coastal county governments, educational institutions and nonprofit groups through a competitive grants program. Since its establishment, the STGP has been able to award more than \$4 million in grants to over 230 sea turtle research, conservation and education projects.

Support for the turtle tag has strengthened over the years. While sales of most specialty plates decreased during the recent economic downturn, the sea turtle plate consistently remained on the list of top sellers. A small portion of revenue from the tag is used by STC to conduct marketing activities on behalf of the sea turtle plate; however, Godfrey credits the long-term success of the plate to the popularity of sea turtles and the passionate support of sea turtle organizations and volunteers around Florida. By purchasing the plate, Floridians are voluntarily funding important programs to save endangered sea turtles and their habitats. Aside from funding the state's regulatory program,

which helped stabilize sea turtle protection in Florida, funds awarded through the Sea Turtle Grants Program have supported important advances in sea turtle research, public education and rehabilitation of sick and injured sea turtles. For example, The Turtle Hospital in Marathon, and other organizations working to rehabilitate sick and injured turtles have received numerous grants for equipment and supplies to help them save sea turtles.

“The Sea Turtle Grants Program has helped the Turtle Hospital to grow into a state of the art medical and educational facility,” said Bette Zirkelbach, manager of The Turtle Hospital.

Perhaps most critical was the emergency grant the hospital received in 2005 after a tidal surge from Hurricane Wilma destroyed part of the facility. “We were devastated by Hurricane Wilma,” said Zirkelbach “The emergency grant from the license plate helped us quickly repair the facility and ensure that no turtles were harmed.”

Since 2013, the Brevard Zoo has received more than \$50,000 in grants from the STGP to help build, equip and maintain a fully functional sea turtle treatment and healing center. Before construction of the center, injured sea turtles in the area had to be transported several hours away for treatment to Orlando, Boca Raton or even the Florida Keys. More loggerhead and green sea turtles nest in Brevard County, where the Brevard Zoo is located, than anywhere else in the United States. A new treatment center on the East Coast of Florida can mean the difference between life and death.

Jon Brangan, deputy director of the Brevard Zoo, said that building the healing center put a shorter distance between the shoreline and a turtle rehab facility. “We can see and triage turtles in half the time that it took in the past,” he said.

Proceeds from the license plate also help institutions improve their educational exhibits. The Barrier Island Center (BIC) located in the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge is an education center jointly operated by STC and Brevard County. The BIC received a grant in 2014 to expand and update its facilities, making sea turtle education an interactive experience for the nearly 30,000 visitors the center receives annually.

Larry Wood, a biologist with the Zoological Society of the Palm Beaches, received several grants from the STGP to launch a unique in-water study of hawksbill turtles in Florida. Of the five species of marine turtles that visit Florida waters, hawksbills remain the most mysterious to scientists. Because they don’t utilize Florida beaches for nesting hawksbills generally have been considered rare in state waters despite being reported often by SCUBA divers along Florida’s southeast coast. As a highly endangered species and an important member of the coral reef community, understanding and conserving hawksbill turtles in this part of their range is important to the future of both. Dr. Wood’s work to document the population of hawksbills living off of Florida’s east coast likely would not have been possible without the support of the sea turtle license plate.



STC director David Godfrey talks to media at the Florida Capitol in 1997 to announce a billboard campaign that will introduce the sea turtle tag to Floridians.

The success of the sea turtle license plate shows how much can be achieved when Floridians join forces to preserve what is important. Every time someone makes the switch to the sea turtle license plate, we create a better future for Florida’s sea turtles. Together, we are helping sea turtles survive every time we drive.

To learn more about the Sea Turtle License Plate and the Sea Turtle Grants Program, please visit www.helpingseaturtles.org.

By Lexie Beach
Communications Coordinator
& Bella Zabinofsky
STC Intern

Stewardship at the Barrier Island Center

In November, 2014, I had the opportunity to participate in a fun Citizen Science Field Excursion organized by STC staff at the Barrier Island Center (BIC) in Melbourne Beach, Florida. For those who are unfamiliar with the BIC, it is an environmental education center located in the heart of the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge that is jointly managed by STC and Brevard County's Environmentally Endangered Lands Program. With staff and volunteers based year-round at the BIC, STC conducts a variety of programs in partnership with the local community that are building coastal awareness and stewardship for the Carr Refuge and the entire barrier island ecosystem. Activities include guided sea turtle walks, beach clean-ups, and dune restoration projects, just to name a few. The BIC also hosts visiting school groups as well as local residents and tourists and is the site of STC's annual Tour de Turtles kick-off events each summer. The facility and its exhibits are open to the public for free.

Along with a group of 20 budding conservationists, I spent a beautiful fall day exploring Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, feeding sea horses at the Vero Beach Marine Lab, checking oyster gardens in the Indian River Lagoon and learning about citizen science projects from around the world. We were also treated to several special guest presentations over a picnic lunch in Sebastian Inlet State Park, which was looking especially picturesque that day.

The morning began with a short shuttle ride to Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, America's first National Wildlife Refuge! After learning about the Refuge's history from an extremely-knowledgeable volunteer, we were free to roam and explore the scenic trails while trying to spot local wildlife. Over 30 species of birds use Pelican Island as a rookery, roost, feeding ground, or loafing area and 16 different species of birds nest there. Several species of sea turtle as well as Florida manatees and bald eagles are also occasionally spotted within the Refuge.


Our next stop was the Florida Institute of Technology Vero Beach Marine Lab where participants learned how we could help save sea horses through a citizen science initiative. We even got an up-close look at newborn sea horses as well as several other species, such as clown fish, which are bred at the Lab for aquaculture use.



During our sea horse presentation, I realized that sea horses and sea turtles actually share many similarities when it comes to the threats they faced. Water pollution, shrimp trawling, and harvest for consumption in the Asian market are all major threats to these charismatic species which make their home right here in Florida waters.

Other highlights of the day's adventure included a great presentation by STC Board Member, Peggy Cavanaugh, whose passion about citizen science projects was positively contagious! Husband and wife team Paul and Anne Lins also spoke about their incredible experiences as volunteer marine mammal responders and sea turtle stranding rescues. We finished the day out on the dock of Hog Point Cove Sanctuary learning about the oyster gardens that are deployed there to help gauge the health of the Indian River Lagoon.

This particular field excursion was just one of many environmental stewardship workshops conducted by STC and Brevard County at the BIC each month. The majority of these programs are free, with some of the more involved ones costing a small donation. This Citizen Science Field Excursion included a t-shirt, lunch and transportation from the BIC. A schedule showing all the activities taking place each month at the BIC can be accessed on STC's website and Facebook page.

As the human population on Brevard County's coast continues to grow, STC and the Barrier Island Center will play an increasingly important role in protecting the fragile barrier island and its globally important sea turtle nesting beaches by educating the surrounding community and providing hands-on learning opportunities for all ages. To learn more about the BIC, visit www.conserveturtles.org/barrierislandcenter.php 

By Lexie Beach
Communications Coordinator

Membership

Adopted Turtles Return to Tortuguero

From July to September each year, Sea Turtle Conservancy researchers tag and collect data on the green turtles that nest on the beaches of Tortuguero, Costa Rica. Since these turtles are not tracked via satellite, STC keeps adoptive “parents” informed when their turtles are spotted nesting in Tortuguero. The “parents” of the turtles are listed below:

Team 6A Awesome Alburto All-Stars

Svea Althausen

Ingrid Arneberg

Kara Badstein

Claudia Baiano

Gabriella Battaglini

Rachel Bladow

Annette Boehm - Core 4

Lindsay Bomok

Skye Brunt

Jeffrey Burgess

Cassie Butler

Cactus Tour

Laura Caldecutt

Wilson Chan

Carole Colley

Kenzie Conley

Joe and Marie Camille Copeland

Cheryl Crandell

Steve Cronmiller

Meredith Eiden

Kathy England

Lucas English

Roth/Klabunde Families

Kevin and Kathy Flynn/Cusack

Annette Gadus

Todd & Ilene Gallagher

The Gibelli Family

Michele Gordy

Barbee Griffis

Lydia Gruenwald

Kimberly Hernandez

Sarah Hunt

Maria Johansson

Miss Jones' Class

Ticia Anne King

Jessica Kinnamon

Kristina Koch

Katherine Kuehne

Kim Lang & Andrew Belyea

Annamae Lawrence

Wanda Lord-Steele

Amanda Love

Sylvain Mahuzier



Daphne Martel

Margaret McConnell

Giovanni Molina

John Mullen

Chet & Candace Neufeld

Ben Nichols

Sue Nilsson

Jean O'Neal

Kirra Lee Parr

Bryan Pocock

Susan Priebe

Ryan Rhinehart

Lola Roske

Thelma Ross

Ben Ryan

Henry Scallorns

Greg Schmitt

Evy Schragar

Sebastian Smith

Adam Stambaugh

Jessica Tai

Jessica Tai

Marita Tuohy

Charlotte Vollmer

Renee Watts - Orange Park Maitland School

Chloe Williams

Todd Wipke

Ann Zyglocke



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Turtle Guardians

Support Sea Turtles!

As a Sea Turtle Conservancy Member you are already doing so much to help sea turtles through conservation programs in Costa Rica, Panama, Florida, Bermuda and Nevis. Would you like to do more without much effort? Please consider becoming an STC Turtle Guardian and making your donation go even further.

For as little as \$5 per month (about the cost of your favorite cup of coffee), you can join this small, dedicated group of Members and receive additional benefits such as an annual calendar and exclusive turtle updates. By giving monthly as a Turtle

Guardian you can ensure that your gift to STC is used as efficiently as possible. Making regular, monthly donations to STC is the most convenient and efficient way to support our efforts to protect sea turtles. Monthly contributions require less paperwork, postage costs and staff time, which means that the greatest percentage of your gift goes directly to saving sea turtles. STC spends 85% of all donations directly on research, conservation, advocacy and education programs. STC has been recognized by charity watchdogs Guide Star and Charity Navigator nine years in a row for our commitment to transparency, good governance and fiscal responsibility.

Visit <https://www.conserveturtles.org/Secure/monthly-giving.php> to sign up to become a Turtle Guardian today. You are in total control of your gift. After your initial donation is processed, future donations will be charged to the same credit card on the day of the month of your choice. Monthly donations can be cancelled or modified any time, by calling Becca Gelwicks, STC's Membership Coordinator, at 352-373-6441, or emailing her at becca@conserveturtles.org. And if you are already a Turtle Guardian, thank you, and please consider recruiting a friend to become one, too! 