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County upgrades coastal lights, educates public to protect sea turtles

Sarasota County will use new funding from the Sea Turtle Grants Program to upgrade additional coastal light fixtures to make them “turtle-safe” and to provide glass decals that remind people to close blinds when interior lights are on.

The \$13,000 in grants will help the county protect sea turtles hatchlings from the disorienting effect of artificial light through its “Partnership for Lighting Improvement” project. This is the fifth award Sarasota County has received from the Sea Turtle Grants Program, a nonprofit organization that funds sea turtle research and protection through the sales of Florida’s Sea Turtle Specialty License Plate.

Sarasota County’s three-year-old program enlists the voluntary participation of coastal condominiums, hotels and private residences to minimize the risk of impacts to sea turtles from artificial light while providing the exterior light necessary for the safety of residents and patrons in parking lots, driveways, and pedestrian areas.

“Another goal of the project is to raise awareness of the impacts of interior light on our nesting beaches,” says Sarasota County Environmental Specialist Keri Nelson. The static cling decals will help remind people to turn off unnecessary interior lights and use window treatments when those lights are on. The posters can be displayed in common areas and community bulletin boards.”

Nelson notes that every May through October, local beaches become important habitat for the largest congregation of sea turtle nesting on the Gulf Coast of Florida. It is an annual ritual of nature when hundreds of loggerhead sea turtles crawl ashore to create new generations.

“The cumulative glow of manmade light is the leading cause of sea turtle deaths in Florida,” says Nelson. “Once hatchlings emerge from the nest, they crawl toward the brightest horizon. If that horizon is in the direction of a street, home, condo or hotel, the tiny hatchlings may move farther onto shore instead of to the Gulf.”

Nelson says tens of thousands of hatchlings are killed by dehydration, exhaustion or starvation when they move toward artificially lit areas.

Another hazard is items left on the beach overnight. “When a female turtle bumps into an object that has been left on the beach at night, like furniture, cabanas, boats or toys, she instinctively abandons her attempt to nest and returns to the water,” adds Nelson.

For more information on sea turtles or to request sea turtle decals and posters, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941- 861-5000 and ask for the Sea Turtle Protection Program.

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