

GROUP SHELLS OUT GRANT TO MONITOR SEA TURTLES

BYLINE: DON JORDAN, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

DATE: June 17, 2005

PUBLICATION: Palm Beach Post, The (FL)

EDITION: FINAL

SECTION: LOCAL

PAGE: 3C

MEMO: Ran all editions.

After nearly 30 hours of setting and checking nets in the Lake Worth Lagoon, conservation workers snagged eight sea turtles this week - and they say that's pretty good.

During the three-day project, each turtle caught was tagged, photographed, and a blood sample was taken before it was released back into the water. The results will be used to identify the size and health of the turtle populations in the area, including the endangered green and leatherback turtles, as well as the threatened loggerhead turtle, said Carly de Maye, an environmental analyst with the county's Department of Environmental Resources Management.

Inwater Research Group Inc., a Jensen Beach-based, nonprofit marine species conservation group, conducted the monitoring.

The project offers insight into the health of the lagoon's ecosystem, de Maye said.

"Turtles are an indicator species, and the health of the turtles will indicate the health of the water," de Maye said.

The project is the first of four monitoring studies scheduled through April. The county is using a \$19,000 grant from the Sea Turtle Grants Program, paid for by revenue from Florida's sea turtle specialty license plate.

Of the eight turtles caught, three had fibropapillomatosis, a herpes-like disease that causes growths on the turtles' skin and is potentially fatal, de Maye said. Although it is not known what causes the disease, it usually happens in areas where there is ongoing development or agriculture, she said. Eventually they hope to get money to conduct DNA analysis on the blood samples, she added.

According to statistics from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, nearly 12,000 green, leatherback and loggerhead sea turtle nests existed on Palm Beach County beaches in 2004. The loggerhead nest count was the lowest since 1993, and about half the number of leatherbacks were recorded in 2004 compared to the previous year.

Officials said disease and shark predation affect the turtle population, but the biggest threat comes from humans through pollution, boating and disturbed nesting patterns.

"They can be very skittish critters," said Karrie Singel, a wildlife technician for the commission.

"People don't realize that when they're walking by the turtle nests, they can scare the animals away."

To report an injured or dead turtle or other marine species, call the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at (888) 404-FWCC.

don_jordan@pbpost.com