



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

2009 Annual Awards Program

Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form

Deadline for Nominations: March 13, 2009

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program

Program Excellence Award Category (*select only one*):

- Community Health and Safety
- Community Partnership
- Community Sustainability
- Strategic Leadership and Governance

Name of program being nominated: Town of Highland Beach Sea Turtle Protection Program

Jurisdiction(s) where program originated: Town of Highland Beach, Florida

Jurisdiction population(s): 4,164

Please indicate the month and year in which the program you are nominating was fully implemented. (Note: All Program Excellence Award nominations must have been fully implemented by or before January 31, 2008, to be eligible. The start date should not include the initial planning phase.)

Month: December Year: 2006

Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in Montréal, Québec, Canada, September 2009. (Each individual listed MUST be an ICMA member to be recognized.):

Name: Dale S. Sugerman, Ph.D.

Title: Town Manager Jurisdiction: Town of Highland Beach

Name: _____

Title: _____ Jurisdiction: _____

Name: _____

Title: _____

Jurisdiction: _____

SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator/Primary Contact

Name of contact: Barbara Blamid James

Title: Sea Turtle Permit Holder #100 Jurisdiction: Town of Highland Beach

Street address: 3201 South Ocean Boulevard, PH #1

City: Highland Beach State/Province: Florida

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Problem Assessment, the Challenge or Need that Prompted
the Local Government to Develop the Program

One could say that this project began somewhere between 125 and 200 million years ago. Mature female sea turtles have been returning to the warm sandy beaches of the Town of Highland Beach, located on the Atlantic Ocean in South Palm Beach County, Florida for eons. The Town of Highland Beach, in and of itself, is not necessarily the community that these momma turtles specifically choose because of its welcoming environment, its soft off-white sand, or even its council-manager form of government. Sea turtles have a built-in “global-positioning-system” that naturally guides them to return to the place where they themselves hatched and entered the ocean for the very first time. The shore of what is now known as the Town of Highland Beach is just lucky that virtually since the beginning of time, a variety of sea turtles return annually to our community to dig their nests, deposit from 80 to 140 eggs in each nest, and then leave those nests unattended to hatch themselves anywhere from 50 to 90 days later – with the hope that the resulting offspring will carry on the cycle of life of their species.

The process of female turtles successfully laying their eggs has been faced with more and more hurdles as time goes on. Besides having a variety of natural obstacles and environmental challenges (predators, rising sea levels, storms), the biggest obstacle to keeping the natural cycle of laying eggs and successful nest hatches is the challenge that has been brought by the arrival of people in what had historically been the turtles’ domain over many thousands of centuries! For most of the last two millennia, the area known today as the Town of Highland Beach was virtually uninhabited by modern life. Around 1949 that changed. Today, one finds endless expanses of high-rise condominiums and large single-family homes. The town’s three-mile long oceanfront

beach is still there, and there is plenty of room for the momma turtles to still do their thing; but modern life in Highland Beach has created an environment where humans have added new challenges for maintaining a successful birth cycle.

Two of the biggest challenges to a successful hatching cycle are, first, the actual ability to create a nest on the beach, as quite often obstructions are placed on the beach by humans (lounge chairs, beach structures, and debris). Momma turtles are totally non-aggressive and won't attempt to nest unless they have a clear path and virtually no obstacles in their way. Another big challenge is as respects the survival of the hatchlings once they emerge from the safety of their sand-covered incubation chambers. Hatchlings typically come out of their nests at night, and by nature are drawn to the waters of the warm Atlantic Ocean. The entrance to their ocean home must be the lightest, brightest horizon visible – often lit up by the moon and the stars. However, when humans allow exterior lighting to shine from their balconies, on the grounds of their condominiums, or the parking lots, this lighting can, and does, confuse the hatchlings. They are drawn by this “man-made” light into the dune, onto the concrete of a swimming pool, or even into a roadway rather than toward the ocean. In fact, the hatchlings are drawn in the exact opposite direction than they should be. Unless they make it to the water within a few moments of surfacing from their nest, their survival rate is fairly doubtful.

Program Implementation and Costs

Sea turtles are a protected species and are regulated at the international, federal, state and local levels of government. In Florida, in Palm Beach County, and in the Town of Highland Beach, there are very specific statutes and ordinances dealing with the protection of and the interactions with sea turtles. Formal Sea Turtle programs are actually recognized by the State of Florida. A community's Sea Turtle program is

authorized through the issuance of a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Marine Turtle permit after the completion of vigorous testing by an individual Permit Holder/applicant. The Permit Holder is responsible for supervising all local volunteer monitors of the sea turtle activity during nesting season.

The Sea Turtle Volunteer Program of Highland Beach was founded back in the late 1980's. The original Marine Turtle Permit holder led a group of environmentally conscious citizens, who had a great interest in helping to protect the sea turtles nesting on our local shores from the development caused by human and predator presence. As the program grew in interest, the volunteers who were marking these nests daily, and keeping an eye on the nests hatching success and failure activity, realized that they often ran up against unsupportive residents and owners. Regularly, the people on the beach did not know what the marker stakes in the sand (put there to indicate a sea turtle nest) represented, and would haphazardly disregard the location or yank the marker out altogether. During much of the first twenty-plus years of the volunteer program, there was not a great deal of solid structured interaction with the Town of Highland Beach' government, because as soon as there was a change of staff or officials, there would be a loss of the sea turtle knowledge that had been accumulated. The privately run Sea Turtle Volunteer Program of Highland Beach was taking two steps forward and almost two steps backward – a frustrating time.

The founding Marine Turtle permit holder retired in late 2006 and he asked Barbara James, one of his sea turtle volunteers and year-round resident to apply for the Permit and continue the program; she accepted the challenge. Barbara was aware that there was great interest among the two dozen sea turtle volunteers for keeping the program going, but something needed fixing. That was, a community-wide conscientious

effort to make the sea turtle program more effective. To Barbara, more effective meant enlisting the Town of Highland Beach in a stronger enforcement of its own sea turtle protection ordinance, a dramatic effort at educating the public on their obligations to ensure the safe protection of momma turtles and their hatchlings. The volunteers already were trained to mark the nests and the unsuccessful nesting attempts; identify the species involved; record the hatches; and inventory the nests after the hatchlings had gone. But the more frustrating part was getting compliance from the neighbors on the beach with regard to the lighting ordinances, the obstructions on the sand and to keep any harassment of the nesting turtles at a standstill.

After a series of meetings with the Town Manager and some of the leaders in the Police Department, it was determined that the Town Commission would reinforce and strengthen its sea turtle protection ordinance, the Town would create a strong educational campaign (using a quarterly newsletter publication, the local government access channel, and a series of flyers and pamphlets) by taking the new effort to the public.

Every day of the week from March 1st until October 31st for one to two hours before sunrise, Sea Turtle Volunteers are on the beach conducting surveys to determine how many turtles have exited the ocean overnight and mark all nests that resulted. They identify property owners who kept lights on at night, and who did not provide clear paths from the waters edge up to the dune line. A property violation form is filled out by a sea turtle volunteer and sent to the police department. In turn, a patrol officer or patrol supervisor directly contacts the offending property owner later that day or the next to let them know that they were violating the sea turtle protection ordinance. One-on-one interactions are made with property owners either by telephone or in person. Literature on the Town's Sea Turtle Program is left with property owners. Cooperation is encouraged,

and typically the property owners are glad to modify their behavior once they understand the importance of doing so. Most tell us they were not aware of the fact that their behavior (lights being left on, obstructions being scattered all over the sand, etc.) could impact the momma sea turtle's efforts to lay their eggs, or the hatchlings ability to go directly to the ocean.

The cost for maximizing participation and cooperation has been zero hard dollars. While there have been some soft costs (personnel time for writing letters, making phone calls, knocking on doors, writing up flyers and articles in the Town newsletter, and air-time on the government access channel), all of those expenses are in the existing annual Town budget and are not an added cost for providing these services.

Tangible Results or Measurable Outcomes of the Program

Annually the Permit holder reports to the FFWCC the number of sea turtle "crawls" (both nesting and aborted nesting attempts) as well as the results of the hatched nests inventories. In 2006, the total crawls were 838, in 2007 it was 1,071 and this past season was 1,259. These counts show increases, the different species do not mate every year, most are alternating years – so the comparison should be between 2006 and 2008.

Lessons Learned

This has been a cooperative effort between a volunteer organization and the local government to not only enhance the protection of an endangered species, but to find a way to engage the entire local community through a combined educational and enforcement program that benefits everyone. The program has resulted in residents and the police department becoming more familiar and engaged with each other in an effort that brings together town employees and residents in something that is good for the community as well as the environment.