A Loggerhead's Warning: The Reality of Sea Turtle Disorientation

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This June, a sea turtle named Krysta left Bradenton Beach after nesting with a satellite transmitter on her shell. As a new contestant of the Tour de Turtles, Sea Turtle Conservancy's research and education program that tracks sea turtle migration routes, residents and visitors of Anna Maria Island gathered to watch as she left the shore to continue her journey. It was a beautiful moment to witness. A moment that makes you recognize the beauty of wildlife.

Since nesting, Krysta swam a 500-mile path, passing through the Gulf of Mexico, offshore of Southern Pinellas County. She has made her way to the coast of Fort Myers where she spent the end of August and this September. (Sea Turtle Conservancy, n.d.) During the last weekend of August, the Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch ended up finding Krysta's hatchlings along Gulf Drive South, a busy main road. Krysta's babies had become disoriented from artificial light along the coastline, putting them in great danger (Randazzo, 2026).

To understand why this happened, you must understand how light pollution impacts sea turtles. When sea turtles hatch, they have a natural born instinct to move in the brightest direction. In a natural system, the brightest horizon should be the ocean as the night sky reflects on it. White, ambient lighting from structures such as buildings, homes, and streetlights disturb this instinct and often leads sea turtles into metropolitan areas. Roads, dehydration, predation, and motor vehicles are threats they face while moving inland (Pinellas County, 2023).

The Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch was able to redirect most of Krysta's hatchlings to darker spots along the beach. Sadly, a few hatchlings were killed or in need of medical attention (Randazzo, 2026). I spoke to the Development and Policy Coordinator of the Sea Turtle Conservancy, Stacey Gallagher, about Krysta's nest. She explained that lots of people responded in anger, especially online to these recent events. After Krysta had gained so much attention, people were shocked and heartbroken about what happened to her hatchlings.

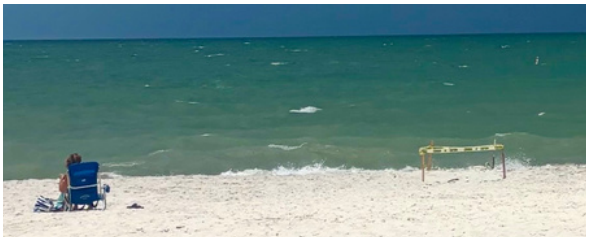
Gallagher made sure to emphasize that just because this case gathered a lot of publicity, Krysta's hatchlings are not the only sea turtles to get disoriented in Florida during nesting season. In fact, she said "This is happening all the time. It happens nightly." Pinellas County has one of the highest rates of sea turtle disorientation in Florida. (McNally et al., 2026).

This story serves as a great reminder that the local laws existing to protect wildlife in Florida aren't always properly enforced. On Pinellas County beaches, between "2018 and 2023, 1048 nests successfully had hatchlings emerge, with 377 (36%) of these emergences resulting in disorientation events" (McNally et al., 2026). This is an alarmingly high rate of sea turtle disorientation within the state of Florida.

Fortunately, this topic is not all doom and gloom. There are communities that have implemented wildlife lighting features into their infrastructure, such as Fort Myers Beach, Sanibel, Palm Beach County, and more, according to Gallagher. These local governments strictly enforce sea turtle lighting ordinances. Environmental awareness is something they have worked to engrave in their communities culture.

So, what can we do to look out for sea turtles? When asking Gallagher about the best ways for residents to advocate for sea turtle protection, she said to speak to your local government. Attending community meetings and contacting community leaders is a great way to do so. Argue for reinforcement codes to be updated, report violations, and reason for greater allocation of funding to environmental management teams.

At home, turn off your exterior lights at night and keep your blinds shut. Sea turtles are not the only animals impacted by artificial lighting. Insects, birds, bats, and frogs will also benefit from taking precautionary action. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission website is a great way to find certified wildlife friendly lighting bulbs and lights you can install.



If you go to the beach at night do not leave your car headlights on in parking lots and do not use phone or traditional flashlights. Humans' eyes naturally adjust to darkness.

Do your research before supporting a local business or company. Certain hotels along the coast for instance, have responded to rising sea turtle disorientation rates by implementing wildlife friendly lighting systems. Support the companies that are working to strengthen environmental value within Pinellas.

It is important to take Krysta's story and this information as a wakeup call. It is up to us to become environmentally responsible residents of Pinellas County. Sea turtle disorientation is a fixable problem. Gallagher states, "Compared to all the other threats that sea turtles face, managing coastal light pollution is relatively easy. It is manageable and it is possible to do." Light pollution does not linger. It does not remain in the atmosphere like greenhouse gases. Let's approach this issue head on turning off or replacing one bulb at a time, together.

If you see a sea turtle disorientation, call the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Division of Law Enforcement @ 1-888-404-3922. To learn more about how to protect sea turtles and track Krysta's migration, visit conserveturtles.org.

References

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