



## South Walton Turtle Watch Volunteer Requirements & Guidelines

Walking the beach looking for sea turtle tracks is fun, especially if you find some tracks. And it sounds easy, but there are a surprising number of things to think about and you must keep in mind. This document will provide you with general information about our volunteer group and the requirements all of our volunteers must meet.

### **General Information:**

**SWTW Director:** Sharon Maxwell has held the state marine turtle permit for our area since 1995. She is the director of our program and decides how we operate under the rules and regulations of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC).

**SWTW Area Coordinators:** South Walton beaches are divided up into four main sections for SWTW coordinators to manage, excluding state parks (they have their own personnel for activities pertaining to their beaches). Each volunteer is assigned to a particular section to walk and is under the supervision of an area coordinator.

**Sea Turtle Nesting season/Volunteering season:** The nesting season is May 1st through October 31st, however we generally conduct daily surveys from May 1st through September 30th, unless conditions dictate otherwise.

### **Volunteer Requirements:**

**Age** - Must be at least 18 years of age. Anyone under the age of 18 must be accompanied by their parent or guardian on all walks.

**Health** - Must be in good physical condition to withstand long walks on the beach in hot, humid weather conditions.

**Communication** - You must have a cell phone to immediately contact your area coordinator during your volunteering activities. Texts and/or calls must be made to inform your area coordinator as soon as your walk has been completed and if you find anything that looks like sea turtle tracks. In addition, all sorts of information is sent out via email so you will be expected to keep yourself up to date by checking your email regularly.

**Volunteering Frequency** - All volunteers must walk at least one day a week to be a part of the South Walton Turtle Watch program. Those volunteers that are on an additional permit, the MTP-120, should walk at least two days a week where possible.

### **Walking:**

- **Expectations** - You must let your area coordinator know as soon as possible if you are going to be unable to walk. This should be done via phone or text. You must confirm they got your message.

- **Times** - Walks begin just after dawn or first light, generally between 5:15 to 6:15 a.m. during the course of the season. We will start the season walking around 5:40 a.m. because it is still dark earlier than that time. As it gets lighter earlier, the walks will start earlier. Your area coordinator or Sharon may keep you informed on the preferred starting times during the season, but it is up to you to be out there just after dawn.
- **Stay focused** - Remember, you are looking for tracks. It's easy to let your mind wander to the beautiful environment you're in, such as the eye catching cloud formations or dolphins in the water, but it only takes a few seconds to pass over turtle tracks (especially if they are from a smaller turtle). Always stay focused and keep a watchful eye on the task at hand.
- **Where to walk** – Don't walk too close to the water, you could miss tracks that have been washed out by a high tide and don't walk too high up on the beach, you might miss a short false crawl. Not only do we document nests, we document false crawls. The spot at which you want to be at is located above the water line. Area coordinators will teach you this during your initial SWTW training.
- **Finding A Crawl or Nest** - If you find something like a crawl or stranded turtle call your area coordinator immediately. They will need to investigate what you found. When in doubt, call. After calling you will need to put out flags to mark the incoming tracks, outgoing tracks, and the outer edge of the nest site. You will then need to continue your section's walk and clear it before returning to the site.
- **Weather** - We walk in almost all weather conditions. This includes rain, but we are concerned with volunteer safety. If there is lightning on your beach at the time of your walk please call your area coordinator before proceeding on your walk. If you can, wait until the lightning passes. If you cannot wait or complete your walk at a slightly later time, then you must inform your area coordinator. Never feel you are expected to walk if there is lightning.
- **Walking As Couples** - SWTW discourages couples from walking together. Sometimes we find ourselves in need of more walkers than we have and when people walk as couples they cover half as much beach as they otherwise could. Walking in pairs is not banned, just discouraged.
- **Dogs** - They are not allowed to accompany volunteers on their walks.

**Beach Clearance Notifications:** Every time you finish your walk you **must** immediately call or text your area coordinator that you have cleared your beach. It is a requirement in our contract with the County that we clear each section of the beach daily. Walkers are urged to complete their walks and clear their sections by 7 a.m. Theoretically vendors are waiting for us to tell them the beach has been cleared so they can set up for tourists and homeowners. We need to finish our walks as soon as we can. Remember, beach vendors need to get on the beach as early as possible to get their work done and they are waiting for us to finish our surveys.

- Note: You will be assigned a section number for the beach you walk. The clearance text should just be the section number and the word cleared. For example: 16 cleared.

**Ordinance Violations:**

- **Vendors** - Historically there have always been a few vendors who have set up early (before you have even cleared the beach) or who have left their setups out overnight in violation of the ordinance. Doing either is illegal, a violation of the Beach Activities Ordinance. Setting up before we clear the beach or leaving setups out overnight can cause problems for sea turtles. Still, DO NOT engage any vendors who are setting up too early.

What you can do is take a photo of the chairs with your camera or smart phone. We would need to know the name of the company who owns the chairs (its usually on the chairs or umbrellas) and the approximate location. If a vendor sets up after you walk past a given area, in other words if they set up behind you, do not go back to take a photo once you pass them by. Unless otherwise directed, photos should be sent to your area coordinator as soon as possible.

The turtles are important, but so is your experience with South Walton Turtle Watch. We want your experience to be fun and enjoyable. We don't want you to do anything you are uncomfortable doing. So if you are uncomfortable documenting violations, don't do it.

- **Lights** - Similarly lights that shine on the beach at night are a violation of the Lighting Ordinance. In the early morning hours you may see lights from homes or condos shining on the beach. You may choose to document these violations or pass them by. Lights disorient nesting sea turtles and lead to the deaths of sea turtle hatchlings every year. If you choose to document lighting violations, you must be able to provide an address for the location. These photos should be forwarded to your area coordinator.

**Do not let vendor setups or lights distract you from your primary duty - the sea turtles!**

**Uniforms/Shirts:** All volunteers are expected wear their SWTW shirts while walking and taking part in any SWTW activities, however shirts will not be handed out until you have walked a month.

- **Who Gets Shirts?** - SWTW shirts are provided only to volunteers who have completed training and who are on the primary MTP-120 permit or the walkers consent permit.

**Supplies:** Items required during your volunteer walks:

- **Cell phone** - To make calls (to inform your area coordinator of any tracks, nests, etc.), to receive calls from your area coordinator, and to call or text your area coordinator once your beach has been cleared.
- **Camera** - (unless your cell phone has the capability). This is for pictures of tracks, nests, and if any issues with vendors or lights are encountered. Please send these pictures to your area coordinator.
- **Flags** Used to mark any tracks or nests. Your area coordinator will provide these.
- **Gloves** - Latex gloves should be with you at all times in the event your area coordinator needs help handling sea turtles. Your area coordinator can provide these.

**Social Media:** As SWTW volunteers, we understand the excitement about aiding such a wonderful endangered species. Having said that... sea turtles are a federally protected species. All sea turtles that nest in our area are endangered except the loggerhead, which is listed as threatened. We conduct our activities through a special permit granted by FWC. It is an important job. Some people can misconstrue what they see online or hear. Therefore, we do not allow volunteers to post or inform others of where nests are located or talk about any relocations of nests. We treat our efforts as a very important job for the protected species and not as social events. If people would like to see pictures they can visit our SWTW board approved Facebook page or web page. Thank you!

**Vacations/Time Off:** Please inform your area coordinator as far in advanced as possible of any walks that you will need to have covered if you plan to be out of town or if you get sick. Phone calls are preferred over text and emails. If you send an email or text be sure to get confirmation the message was received. Also, if any changes or swaps of beach walks take place you must inform your area coordinator beforehand so they are aware of who is responsible for the beach clearance on that particular day and location.

- Note: If walker is unable to walk and a fill-in walker cannot be found the area coordinator must walk the location his or herself, if they are not already walking that morning. Please be courteous and keep your area coordinator informed to ensure all sections are covered.

**Training:** FWC holds training once a year in Panama City, FL. All volunteers must attend this training before they begin volunteering, and then are required to go every other year.

There are people out there who may be uncomfortable with what we are doing. They might question us walking on their beach, but we can always walk seaward of the midpoint of the beach. The midpoint being between the water and the toe of the dune, as we look for tracks. And if we find a crawl we can go where ever we need to, to investigate that crawl or nest. Most people like us a lot, support what we do, and are very interested in hearing from you about what's going on with the turtles on our beaches.

Remember you are a South Walton Turtle Watch ambassador and you will be seen by lots of people. Always try to be friendly and helpful. Don't engage in political conversations and refer all media questions to Sharon. Never do anything inappropriate as those actions will most likely be reported to your area coordinator or Sharon Maxwell who has to answer for anything her volunteers do.

Here are two links to some great sea turtle information. The top link, has a good sea turtle video that's about 31 minutes long. Its called, *A Beachcombers Guide to Turtle Tracks*.

<http://myfwc.com/research/wildlife/sea-turtles/nesting/training-materials/>

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