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SEA TURTLE NESTING SEASON UNDERWAY
ALONG FLORIDA'S BEACH – THE ST. PETERSBURG/CLEARWATER AREA

**Increase of Nests from Last Year Cause Officials To Remind Visitors Of
Steps To Protect Endangered Turtles**

CLEARWATER, Fla. (July 3, 2000) – The beaches of the St. Petersburg/Clearwater area have yielded a record 121 Loggerhead turtle nests so far this turtle nesting season, an increase of 34 more than this time last year. The first nest, discovered on May 6 is due to hatch during the first week of July releasing 80 to 150 hatchlings of only 1% will reach adulthood. Several types of endangered sea turtles are nesting and hatching on the area's 35 miles of beaches from April through November.

Florida is the world's second largest rookery for Loggerheads, and the St. Petersburg/Clearwater area was home to more than 165 nests and 10,000 hatchlings last year. Known as Florida's Beach, the area is also the most popular vacation destination on Florida's West Coast hosting more than 4.5 million overnight visitors annually. It's a top priority during nesting season for officials to educate visitors and residents to protect sea turtles and nests while sharing the beach for the summer.

"Florida is second only to Masirah Island, Oman, for nesting Loggerheads," said Terri Hepburn, marketing director of the Clearwater Marine Aquarium. "As you can imagine, a small Middle Eastern island doesn't get quite the number of tourists to its beaches that Florida does."

Authorized by the state and federal government to monitor and protect the endangered sea turtles, the Clearwater Marine Aquarium monitors all nests in the St. Petersburg/Clearwater area. The Aquarium works with area properties and tourism organizations to educate visitors and residents on how to co-exist with sea turtles. They offer these tips:

- Turn out all exterior lights on the beach at night. In areas where artificial lighting overpowers natural light, Loggerhead turtles and hatchlings can become disoriented leading to dehydration and death.
- Draw curtains at night where interior light would shine on the beaches.

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- Do not disturb female turtles who come ashore. Sea Turtles use the cover of darkness to avoid encounters with people and predators. Interference can keep females from nesting.
- Do not use photo equipment with a flash to photograph female turtles and avoid using flashlights or fishing lamps on the beach during nesting season.
- Do not disturb marked sea turtle nests. Sea turtles and nests are protected under the Endangered Species Act and Florida law. Penalties for interfering with them can be severe.

If a female Loggerhead makes it safely to a nesting site, she will dig a cavity in the sand and deposit approximately 120 ping-pong ball sized eggs. She will cover and camouflage the nest and return to the sea without looking back. The eggs are vulnerable to a variety of predators including people, dogs, crabs, birds and raccoons. After 55-60 days, if the eggs have been able to incubate, the hatchlings will emerge and follow the brightest light -- the moon -- into the sea.

The Clearwater Marine Aquarium provides a one-hour educational Turtle Walk along the beaches that includes an educational discussion with biologists at nest sites. The Turtle Walks take place Saturday and Sunday mornings from June to August. The cost is \$6 for adults and for children 12 and under, \$5, with all proceeds supporting ongoing conservation efforts of the sea turtle program at the Aquarium. For more information, call 888-239-9414.

Adopt-A-Nest opportunities are also available. The Aquarium is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and release of sick and injured marine animals. The Aquarium performs marine research and provides visitors with a "Window to the Sea," through which a better understanding and appreciation is gained for the marine environment.

For more information about the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, call (888) 239-9414 or visit their website at www.cmaquarium.org.

The St. Petersburg/Clearwater Area is the leading destination on Florida's Gulf coast, drawing more than 4.5 million annual overnight visitors who stay an average of eight nights. The area is best known for 35 miles of spectacular beaches, three of which are rated among the top in the United States, and record-breaking sunshine. A variety of attractions, world-class museums, sporting activities and nature-related experiences are also readily available.

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