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Sea Turtle Biologist

We're here at Vero Beach, Florida, which is located on the east coast. It's just south of the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, which is one of the most important sea turtle nesting beaches in the world, certainly the most important in the United States. We're standing in front of a giant sea wall, which was built a few years back to protect a number of homes in this area that were increasingly vulnerable to erosion.

This sort of structure is one of the most significant threats to sea turtle nesting habitat here in Florida, and this particular wall is a very controversial part of the history of the battle between beachfront development, and the protection of sea turtle nesting habitat. As this wall was being built, a number of organizations, including the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, challenged the construction of the wall as being illegal.

For the last fifty years, a number of organizations have been trying their hardest to learn as much as we can about sea turtles, and try to protect them throughout their range. A lot of people ask, "why are sea turtles so important? Why should we be saving them?" One of my immediate answers is these creatures, they're a beautiful part of the natural world, and we ought to save them because it's the right thing to do. But, there are also a lot of important economic arguments that are important to us as humans.

Sea turtles are very important parts of the marine and ecosystem. Each species plays a very important role in the health of different ecosystems. Because turtles must return to the beach to deposit their eggs in the sand, they're one of the few marine creatures that brings all of the nutrients of the sea back to the land. This has been found to be very important in sustaining the health and welfare of beach and dune systems, which of course protects upland property, and creates a beautiful environment for us to all go to the beach and enjoy sunbathing and recreation. So everywhere sea turtles are found, whether it's on coral reefs or sea grass beds, or on the beaches where they nest, they fill a very important ecological role and help sustain the health of those ecosystems.

Well the battle to protect sea turtles is one that is closely linked to the way we manage our coastline. Sea turtles are forever linked to the land because they must return here to nest, and so we humans have an important responsibility to protect their nesting habitat. In Florida, that means we have to do a really good job of protecting nesting beaches from inappropriate development. There are all kinds of houses and structures built on the beach, such as this sea wall behind me, and that impedes turtles trying to return to nest. It's very important to protect nesting beaches, because for hundreds of years turtles have been nesting there and for hundreds, hopefully thousands of years in the future they'll be coming back to that very same spot to nest. We need to do everything we can to protect those nesting beaches and keep them healthy.

One of the things that's really a concern to those of us in Florida is how sea level rise and global warming are going to impact turtle nesting beaches. When you do things like build sea walls on the beach you're drawing a line in the sand and saying, "this is where the edge of the beach can come to, and everything in front is available to turtles, but everything behind is locked up"...for homes or swimming pools or parking lots or roads. And that's just not going to work over the long term. At some point, as the sea level continues to rise, we're going to lose our nesting beaches.

We need to decide what we're going to do about that. Are we going to protect the nesting beach? Are we 'going to re-nourish the beaches, continually dumping sand at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars a year, or, are we going to consider retreating from the coast in a managed way. --maybe having the state or the federal government, conservation groups, buy out beachfront property owners so that we can allow the beach to move back when sea level rises. These are some of the controversial issues being considered now, and part of the public debate about how to manage our coast for the long-term preservation of sea turtles.

When it comes to saving sea turtles there's lots of good news. There are places along the beach like Tortuguero, Costa Rica, Panama, even right here in the Archie Carr Refuge in Florida, where a lot of wonderful things have been done to recover sea turtle populations. There's really good news from a lot of these beaches, so I'm encouraged that people can save sea turtles if we stick to it. If we protect nesting beaches they will nest successfully and rebound on their own, essentially. But we need to do a better job of managing their beaches.

In Florida that means controlling unregulated beachfront development, and really doing everything we can to eliminate the construction of sea walls like that one behind me. I'm optimistic that people care and they're willing to do what it takes to save turtles. We just need to make sure that our politicians, our decision-makers at the national, state, and local level realize that people care enough to make hard decisions to save turtles. It can be done.

One of the things that we like to say, because often it's very important to try to make an economic argument, that saving the environment is good for the economy, and not just something that's going to cost people money. In the case of sea turtles, it's very true because what's good for turtles is good for the economy. If it's good for turtles, it's good for tourism. Who wants to come spend a day at the beach in the shadow of a 30-foot high or 20-foot high sea wall? It's just not a natural beach experience. People often say that one of the main reasons they come to Florida, or any other place, is to experience the natural environment there. In Florida we're gradually losing our natural beaches because of the construction of sea walls and other artificial beaches, so if we can get things like that under control, we're going to protect our natural beaches and continue to have a place that tourists are going to want to come to and recreate.

I often like to say that sea turtles are an amazing species, they've been around for a hundred, hundred and fifty million years. This is a fairly heavily populated area of the state of Florida, and just up the beach from this seawall is the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge. There are 20 thousand turtle nests every year in that refuge, and there are people who also live all along the refuge. It's a 20-mile stretch of beach that is the most important loggerhead nesting beach in the western hemisphere, and one of the most important green turtle beaches anywhere as well.

People can co-exist with sea turtles. Although this is a very important turtle nesting beach, people live all along the beach as well. By taking a few simple steps during the summer months, like keeping their lights dim, avoiding a lot of night-time activity on the beach, turtles are thriving on the beach. In the marine environment we have to do things like control certain fishing activities in different areas, which are also a major threat to turtles.

For instance, with the shrimp trawling industry, a number of years ago, people developed turtle excluder devices, which help turtles escape while their trawls are pulling the nets in the water. This was a very important development, it allowed the shrimp industry to continue and saved a lot of turtles in the process. We need to continue to think about ways that we can improve commercial fishing like the long line fishing industry, so that it minimizes the impacts to marine turtles, because that's one of the few areas left where they're still having a very significant impact on the survival of sea turtles.