

Jensen Research Lab releases 150 young turtles

By PHIL DAVIES
News Staff Writer

HUTCHINSON ISLAND — Approximately 150 8-month-old green turtles made their tortuous way to the sea Thursday afternoon, egged on by a horde of camera-toting turtle fanciers.

About 50 swim-suited residents and vacationers inched out into the surf crashing onto Stuart Beach as Jensen Beach Research Laboratory staff allowed the one-pound reptiles to escape from styrofoam containers and thrash over the hard-packed sand into the waves.

The watchers kept hard on the rear flippers of the endangered greens, bending low to snap pictures and exhorting slow pokes to catch up with speedsters already making long tire-like tracks toward the water.

"When we were at the House of Refuge Museum we heard that the turtles were to be released," Dolores Kallimani of Elkhart, Ind. said, watching one of the rank and file re-orient itself and nose seaward again after being hurled back by a breaker. "So I thought we'd come down and watch."

Stuart resident David Johnson said he didn't come out to the beach expressly to view the turtle release.

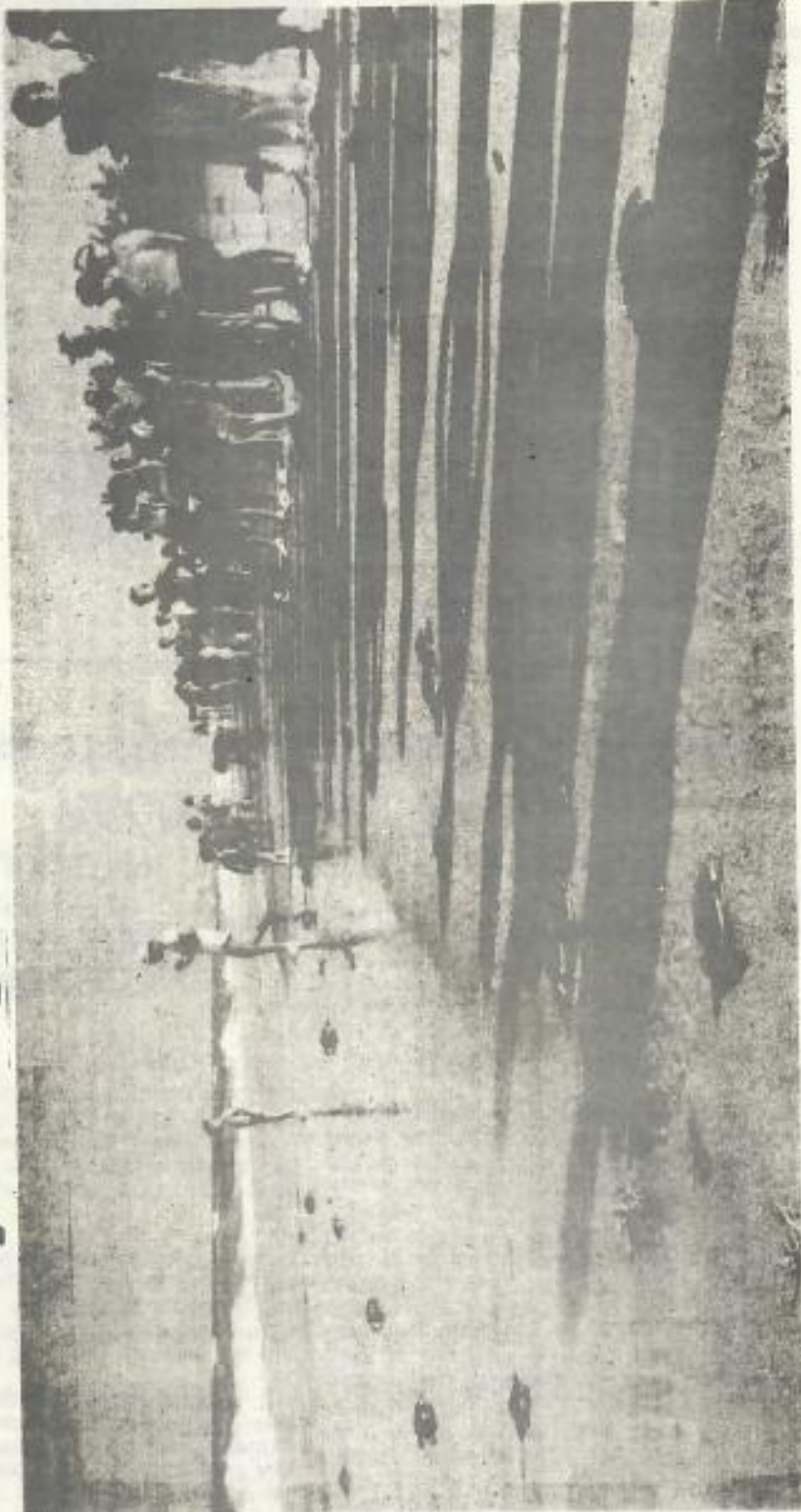
"I just came out to surf," he said. "Cute little buggers, aren't they?"

Miamian Bruce Snyder said he approves of the turtle replenishment program carried out by the state Department of Natural Resources — at turtle sanctuaries such as the House of Refuge.

"We're usually here about this time every year," Snyder said. "We think this is pretty super that they do this sort of thing to save the turtle."

Englishman Richard Harding said the release was a far cry from the usual scene on the beaches at Brighton and Blackpool. He and his family never had seen a turtle release before, he said.

"The kids were fascinated, because they saw some big ones at Disneyworld," Harding said.



Some spectators hold the line while others trail behind dozens of juvenile green turtles making their way to the sea at Stuart Beach Thursday afternoon. Photo by Joseph Noble.

Catch adult turtles will return the tags, enabling researchers to plot the range of the species.

"They go all over the Atlantic from the Bahamas to the Azores and every other place you can think of," Witham said.

Released turtles, equipped with tags since 1972, may one day prove or refute the hypothesis that adult female turtles return to the beach on which they hatched to lay their own batches of eggs.

Green turtles nest all along the Florida coast from Cape Canaveral to Key Biscayne, Witham said. DNR's release program ensures that turtles

that would naturally be eaten inside the egg or en route to the sea live to an age at which their chances of survival are greatly increased.

"It would take a shark or something like that to get - them now," Witham said. In the wild, all but 3 percent of hatchlings will perish before maturity. Perhaps 25 percent of the turtles raised in aquaria and released as juveniles will live 15 years, he said.

The turtles become black specks caught on the crest of the waves by the low westerling sun, then disappear completely. The spring event is over. The spectators gaze for a few moments more into the east, then trudge through the sand to their cars.