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## ORV Kills Nesting Sea Turtle on Cape Hatteras National Seashore

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.—After a rare female loggerhead sea turtle was dragged and killed by an off-road vehicle while attempting to nest at night on the beaches of Cape Hatteras National Seashore, National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife and the Southern Environmental Law Center today requested that the National Park Service immediately install barriers on all ramps to Seashore beaches from sunset until when the beach is cleared by the turtle patrol to that enforces beach driving restrictions to protect nesting sea turtles. The current practice of posting signs regarding the nighttime beach driving restrictions during turtle nesting season did not deter the off road vehicle (ORV) drivers and did not protect the turtle.

According to the National Park Service, the female loggerhead was struck and dragged approximately 12 feet by an ORV and her eggs strewn across the sand on Ocracoke Island sometime between the night of June 23 and early morning of June 24, 2010. The resulting injuries were fatal. Another nearby loggerhead sea turtle nest was run over by an ORV or multiple ORVs crushing the eggs in that nest.

Under an interim protection plan currently in place, driving on the National Seashore beaches is prohibited during evening hours in months when turtles are nesting. The National Park Service has proposed a final ORV management plan that would continue turtle protections and prohibit night beach driving during sea turtle nesting season. Dare County and other ORV advocacy groups oppose these restrictions.

“This tragic incident demonstrates conclusively that there can be no unauthorized vehicles on Seashore beaches at night during turtle nesting season--period,” stated Derb Carter of the Southern Environmental Law Center, which represents the conservation organizations working to protect wildlife and improve ORV management on Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

Loggerhead sea turtles are protected as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is considering elevating the loggerhead to endangered status given its low numbers. Harming a loggerhead sea turtle is a federal violation subject to both civil and criminal penalties.

"The death of this rare turtle could have and should have been prevented," said Jason Rylander, staff attorney for Defenders of Wildlife. "Better management of beach driving is essential to ensure such a loss does not happen again."

The death of the sea turtle overshadowed good news this week that the federally threatened piping plover population on the seashore has fledged a record number of chicks in 2010. On June 24, the National Park Service reported that so far this breeding

season 15 piping plover chicks have fledged, a record number since 1992 when intensive monitoring began. Three nests remain so the number could increase. Prior to an April 2008 consent decree, piping plover numbers within Cape Hatteras National Seashore reached the all time low of no chicks in 2002 and 2004.

“The successful nesting and fledging of this threatened species on the seashore is further evidence of how reasonable restrictions on ORV use are necessary and can benefit birds and other wildlife,” stated Walker Golder, associate director of North Carolina Audubon. Under the interim protection plan, ORV use is restricted in designated bird nesting areas on the seashore.