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Local Groups Call on Rental Companies and Homeowners to Protect Sea Turtles Ahead of Nesting Season

Garden City, SC – As sea turtle nesting season approaches on May 1, the South Carolina Environmental Law Project (SCELP) and the Garden City & Surfside affiliate of the South Carolina United Turtle Enthusiasts (Garden City Surfside SCUTE) are sounding the alarm: widespread lighting violations along the shoreline are pushing threatened sea turtles closer to extinction.

In letters sent April 9, the organizations called on vacation rental companies to take immediate action to correct noncompliant lighting and protect nesting turtles. They highlighted chronic violations of Georgetown County's Lighting Ordinance and the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which have led to disorientation, injury and deaths of nesting sea turtles and hatchlings. The letters urge property owners to survey their properties, correct violations and designate a point of contact to address lighting issues during nesting season.

Georgetown County's Lighting Ordinance sets clear standards, including prohibitions on floodlights and requirements for shielding or screening lighting during nesting season. Yet Garden City Surfside SCUTE's team of approximately 40 volunteers consistently documents widespread violations along the shoreline.

Sea turtles, protected under the federal ESA, rely on dark, undisturbed beaches to nest and survive. Artificial lighting from beachfront properties disrupts this natural process, luring turtles toward danger. Property owners and managers can be held legally responsible under the ESA for uncontrolled lighting that harms or kills sea turtles, even in Horry County, where there is no lighting ordinance.

SCELP and Garden City Surfside SCUTE are committed to working collaboratively with property owners acting in good faith. However, they have made clear that formal enforcement, including referrals to Georgetown County Code Enforcement and potential litigation under the ESA, will follow if violations go unaddressed.

"I have seen what happens when sea turtles become misoriented due to man-made lighting firsthand. It's devastating, and almost always ends in loss," said Vickki Hardwick, Co-Leader of Garden City Surfside SCUTE. "Our goal is to prevent these tragedies before they happen and protect these endangered and beloved animals. The only bright thing a sea turtle should ever encounter is the moon and a future."

Among the incidents documented by Garden City Surfside SCUTE volunteers are a nesting female that came within 15 feet of being struck by a vehicle after being misoriented by lights from a beachfront home, and a floodlight mounted on a rooftop that disoriented approximately 95 hatchlings – all of whom would have died without the intervention of volunteers.

"Every year, we see the devastating impact of unchecked lighting on sea turtles," said Michael Corley, Deputy Director at SCELPA. "This doesn't have to be the case. There are straightforward solutions, and the time to act is now before the nesting season begins."

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The South Carolina Environmental Law Project is a nonprofit public interest law firm. We have used our legal expertise to protect land, water and communities across South Carolina since 1987. Learn more at scelp.org.

Garden City & Surfside affiliate of the South Carolina United Turtle Enthusiasts is a group of volunteers dedicated to sea turtle conservation in Georgetown and Horry counties. Organized in 1990, Garden City Surfside SCUTE is permitted by the S.C. Department of Natural Resources to protect turtle nests, relocate turtle nests if necessary, and record turtle deaths through the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network.