



# Preserving a MIRACLE

ALABAMA'S SHORELINE WITNESSES A NATURAL SPECTACLE OF BIRTH AND SURVIVAL EACH YEAR AS A HOST OF TINY, ENDANGERED SEA TURTLE HATCHLINGS MAKE THEIR WAY FROM SAND TO WATER.

Enjoying the beautiful, white-sand beaches of Alabama is a common pastime for many locals; however, most visitors are unaware of who else they are sharing the shoreline with—the endangered sea turtle. Each year thousands of sea turtles are hatched along the Alabama shoreline from Orange Beach to Dauphin Island. From July to October, nests are built and baby sea turtles fight to make their way to the water.

The most frequently spotted sea turtle in Alabama is the loggerhead. The loggerhead was named for its large head and blunt, powerful jaws. The top shell, called a carapace,

TEXT BY ELIZABETH YONTZ





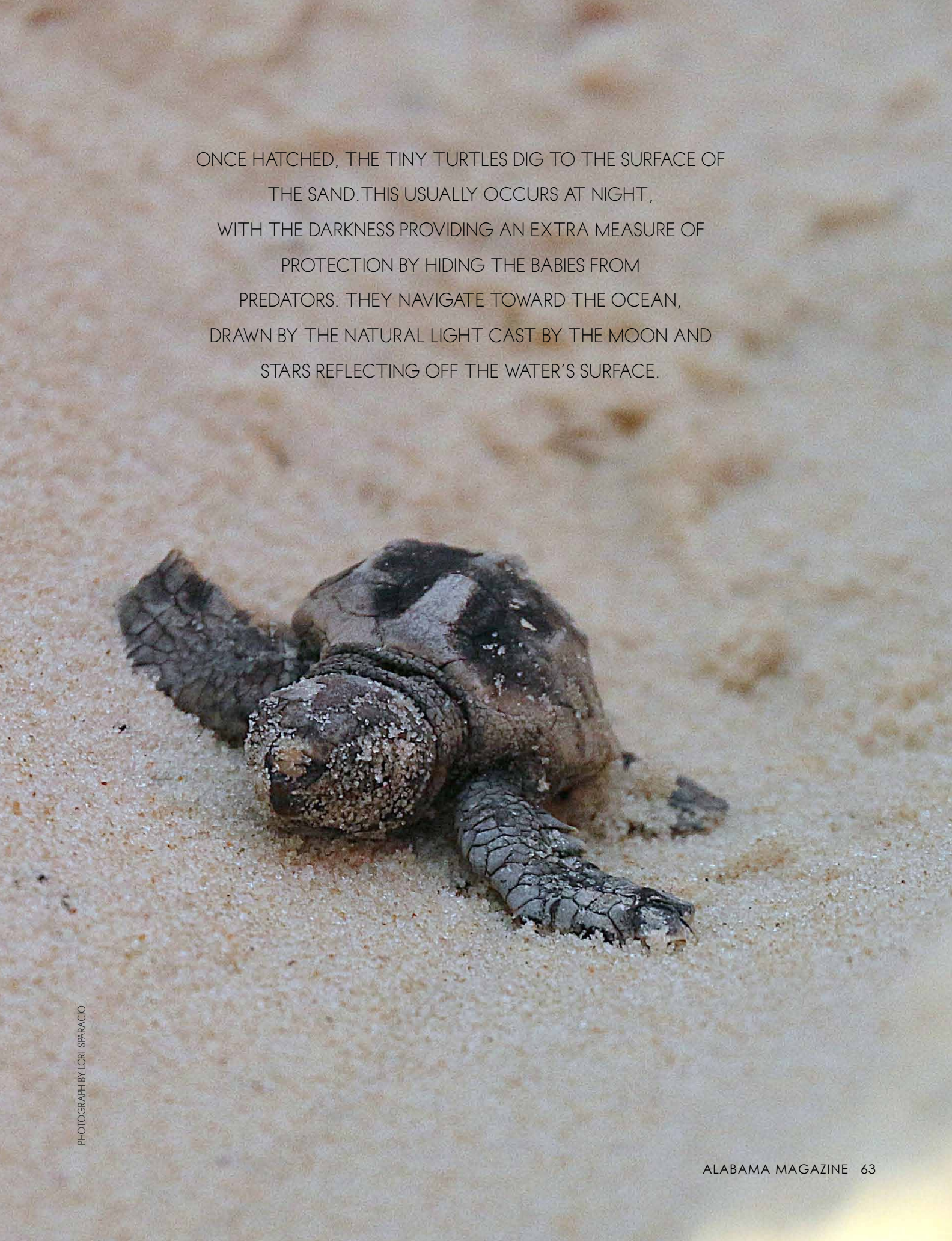
is heart shaped and a reddish-brown color. Hatchlings lack the reddish-brown color the adults display, but are rather a dark-gray color. Adults grow to an average weight of 200 pounds, but can reach up to 350 pounds. In contrast, the baby turtles weigh only 1 to 2 ounces. The loggerhead is rare and endangered and has been listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As fellow beach-goers, it is our responsibility to do our best to help preserve their lives.

It is against the law to disturb nesting sea turtles, hatchlings, or their nests, and Share the Beach, a sea turtle volunteer program initiated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has done an exceptional job at protecting the last of the ancient reptiles. Each year, hundreds of volunteers from the program take their turn patrolling an assigned stretch of the beach, being readily available for nighttime nest-sitting when hatching time is near, and keeping supplies and equipment close at hand. Together, the volunteers work to protect Alabama's coastal ecosystem. The volunteers not only assist on the beach but are also involved in public school groups, where they educate students on the endangered species and raise awareness.

Female loggerheads lay an average of 110 eggs at a time, but only a few young turtles make it to adulthood. Mike Reynolds, head of Share the Beach, was very proud of this past year's nesting season. "We had 111 nests in Alabama, and typically 78 percent will survive," he says. "Some nests get washed away by storms, covered from high tides, and some eggs are infertile." Reynolds and his volunteers are



PHOTOGRAPH BY LORI SPARACIO



ONCE HATCHED, THE TINY TURTLES DIG TO THE SURFACE OF THE SAND. THIS USUALLY OCCURS AT NIGHT, WITH THE DARKNESS PROVIDING AN EXTRA MEASURE OF PROTECTION BY HIDING THE BABIES FROM PREDATORS. THEY NAVIGATE TOWARD THE OCEAN, DRAWN BY THE NATURAL LIGHT CAST BY THE MOON AND STARS REFLECTING OFF THE WATER'S SURFACE.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LORI SPARACIO



responsible for 47 miles of nesting habitat. They look for tracks left in the sand from the mother dragging herself along the shore, then follow the tracks and mark the nests. They watch them for about 65 days. “The secret is a lot of manpower when directing the turtles in the right direction,” says Reynolds. Protecting the young loggerhead turtles is a difficult but rewarding job.

The hatchlings naturally follow light. “Artificial light is our biggest nemesis. Sea turtles are night-time hatching and use the moonlight to get to the water and survive,” Reynolds says. “Developed beaches produce a lot of light from garages, porches, and the city, which draws the turtles away from the shore.” It is important to avoid using flashlights and to turn off patio lights at night while vacationing so as to not confuse the baby sea turtles. In addition to the lighting issue, other threats to sea turtles include marine pollution and coastal development.

Alabama has the privilege of preserving wildlife and preventing extinction of a miraculous species. It is an honor to be a part of the development and survival of this species.

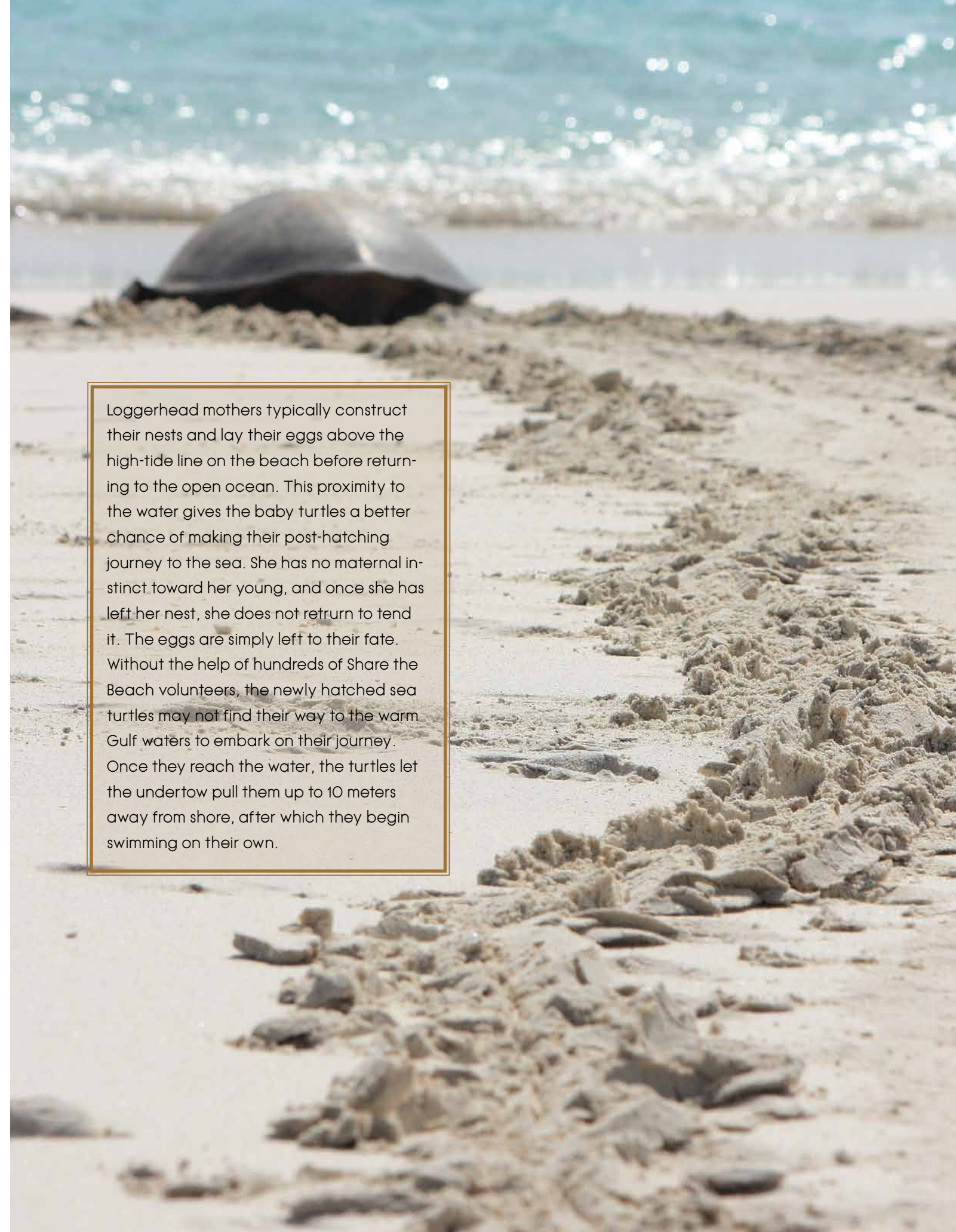
To volunteer or learn more about how you can help, visit [alabamaseaturtles.com](http://alabamaseaturtles.com).



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Loggerhead mothers typically construct their nests and lay their eggs above the high-tide line on the beach before returning to the open ocean. This proximity to the water gives the baby turtles a better chance of making their post-hatching journey to the sea. She has no maternal instinct toward her young, and once she has left her nest, she does not return to tend it. The eggs are simply left to their fate. Without the help of hundreds of Share the Beach volunteers, the newly hatched sea turtles may not find their way to the warm Gulf waters to embark on their journey. Once they reach the water, the turtles let the undertow pull them up to 10 meters away from shore, after which they begin swimming on their own.