

'Passion' of Seabrook turtle watch filmed for documentary



For David Weintraub, the loggerheads he filmed became a fascination.

Call of the Ancient Mariner

To learn more about the Center for Cultural Preservation or the sea turtle documentary, "Call of the Ancient Mariner," go to saveculture.org.

By Bo Petersen

SEABROOK ISLAND - The gathering caught David Weintraub's eye at first, all those people circling around on something on the beach. Then he saw the tiny creatures wriggling toward the ocean.

The veteran documentary filmmaker wasn't on Seabrook Island to work; he was celebrating his anniversary. His recent work with the Hendersonville, N.C.-based [Center for Cultural Preservation](http://www.saveculture.org) had focused on mountain oral histories.

He had only passing knowledge of sea turtle nesting and had not heard

of the low-profile turtle watch group in the gated barrier island community. It didn't matter. The Seabrook Island Turtle Patrol had a story to tell.

More than 1,100 people along the South Carolina coast volunteer in one of a number of groups organized by beaches to watch for sea turtles laying nests, keep people from overrunning them, or move nests when they are in a bad spot.

When the nests hatch, trained volunteers inventory eggs and often help struggling hatchlings to the sea. The Seabrook patrol, working on a gated island, doesn't get much

attention, despite handling dozens of nests each year. They are as ardent as they are underacknowledged.

"I was totally smitten. People 9 years old to 90 years old helping out and totally mesmerized (by the hatchlings)," Weintraub said. "Even though they don't get a lot of herald, sometimes the smaller the island the more passion there is. What a powerful way of telling about the connection (between culture and nature). This is in our DNA."

The result is "Call of the Ancient Mariner," an hour-and-a-half-long film that works from the efforts of the Seabrook patrol to

trace the cultural connection of people with sea turtles, what Weintraub labels as the world's oldest living dinosaurs.

Photos



The film includes little known turtle tidbits, such as the oldest known coin in the world carries an image of a sea turtle and one of the earliest forms of writing was of figures sketched on the inside of turtle shells. The shells were set on fire, and the way the figures cracked were considered augurs of the future.

"The idea is really cool, to bring a native cultural understanding of wildlife,

focused on sea turtles," said biologist David Owens, of College of Charleston, who was interviewed for the film.

For the Seabrook neighbors who form the patrol, watching Weintraub evolve as a turtle enthusiast was more rewarding than finding themselves on camera.

"You're always embarrassed. We have no makeup on, and it's filming at 7:30 in the morning," said volunteer Terry Fansler. But she and others in the patrol led and mentored by Beautsie Zahrn make a point of teaching onlookers about the species and the need to conserve it. As much as the turtle was a study for Weintraub, he was a study for them.

"He really took off on a journey, and that's when it became a film. It was incredible experiencing his enthusiasm," she said. "We really want to engage. Anything we can do to get the word out about these turtles."

The iconic loggerhead is the primary South Carolina nester among at least four of the seven sea turtle species that come in on Lowcountry beaches. All seven species are considered endangered or threatened.

Since the turtles were put on the federal Endangered Species List in the 1970s, the numbers of Atlantic nesting loggerhead turtles generally have been thought to be in severe decline in Florida, where the overwhelming bulk of nests are laid, and in a more gradual decline in South Carolina, where the most nests outside Florida are laid.

South Carolina was an earlier leader in the formation of resident turtle watch groups, and the ponderous loggerhead became a beloved emblem of the coast. Partly because of the turtle watch efforts, the loggerhead here is beginning to show signs of recovery.

Like a lot of grass-roots nonprofits, Weintraub's Center for Cultural Preservation is funded largely through contributions and Weintraub is now in a [crowd-funding campaign](#) to put finishing touches, such as music, to the footage. He plans to show it locally at least as an educational film and hopes to land a slot on public broadcasting.

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