

Pensacola Beach ambassadors inform visitors of rules



Santa Rosa Island Authority has recruited a team of Beach Ambassadors to spread the word about maintaining a clean and safe beach. Kimberly Blair/kblair@pnj.com



Kimberly Blair, Staff writer

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The Island Authority has dispatched ambassadors on the beach as another component in their campaign to educate visitors about beach rules, like taking their tents and chairs off the beach at night.

Karen Pace and Russ Nicholson hopped out of an all-terrain vehicle on Pensacola Beach on Wednesday and quickly folded up a toppled over metal frame of a beach cabana that was left overnight, seemingly abandoned, near a sea turtle nest.

If the nest were to hatch, it would be a deadly obstacle for the palm-sized babies, Nicholson said.

"Besides the sea turtles, it's dangerous," Pace said.

Winds from a late afternoon thunderstorm could toss it into the Gulf or it could hinder lifeguards responding to a swimmer in distress, she explains. Never mind the fact it's an eyesore.

Pace and Nicholson are Santa Rosa Island Beach Ambassadors who, along with two other volunteers, were recently recruited as part of a campaign to rein in a trend that's exploding. Visitors and residents are leaving cabana frames, beach chairs and other supplies out overnight, and sometimes for days or even a week or more as a way to claim a piece of sand during their stay. Some visitors even abandon them when they pack up their bathing suits and head home.

Up to 40 or 50 of these unoccupied camps often clog small portions of beach, mostly behind condominiums, making it nearly impossible for lifeguards, emergency responders or even sea turtle monitors to patrol the beach.

The practice is also spoiling the photos of beach weddings, Pace said. "Brides want their photos taken with a clean landscape."

As ambassadors, their mission is to patrol the 8.1 mile of beach and stop to have friendly chats with visitors, welcome them and ask them to pack up their supplies and break down their gear at night, Nicholson said. They tell them they can store their gear behind the dune line, if they don't want to cart it back to their condo or vacation home.

"We also discuss local restaurants, jellyfish sting remedies, the Naval Aviation museum, surf advisory number," he said. "It's truly an ambassador thing."

They also tag unoccupied tents with colorful placards touting the friendly reminder to pack up at night and why it's important.

Ambassadors hit the beach shortly after the Island Authority distributed refrigerator magnets with "Beach Rules" to all the vacation rentals and homeowner associations on the beach as a first phase of the campaign, said Robbie Schrock, Island Authority director of administration who is facilitating the program.

"The idea is to educate the tourist who are renting the homes and condos on Pensacola Beach, letting them know what a unique and special environment that we live in," she said. "We live in paradise, and we want to keep it that way."

On Wednesday, the Ambassadors tried out another new method of driving home that message. Attached to the back of their vehicle was a "Brand the Sand" roller, a creation of Nicholson's, with a rubber stamp that imprints "Leave only your foot prints" in the sand. The message repeats over and over again as they drive along.

If all these measures fail to clean up the beach at night, Escambia County may impose an ordinance making it unlawful to leave beach supplies out overnight, as neighboring beaches have done, Schrock said.

Ninety percent of the time, visitors are happy to help out once they understand why it's important, Pace said.

Teresa and Mark Summer, of St. Louis, who have vacationed on the beach on and off for 15 years, and purchased their first beach tent this year, said "No problem" to the rule.

And Christi Walters, of Louisiana, said she and her family left their stuff on the beach, including kayaks for the week-long vacation because they saw everyone else doing it. "We'll do whatever we can to help," she said.

But a few people thought it absurd to ask vacationers to haul their gear in every night.

"We've been doing this for 12 years," Ken Kranz, of Texas, said about his beach cabana camp secured with stakes. "I'm 75, and I don't want to carry it back and forth. If you want to go make a law, I'll go to another beach."

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Sept. 5, 2014, 9:39 a.m.