



Sea Turtle Conservation and Tourism Clash on Japan's Yakushima Island

HONOLULU (29 June 2007) The start of summer has led to a clashing of conservation and tourism on the island of Yakushima, Japan. This island is home to the primary rookery for the North Pacific loggerhead sea turtle where more than 30 percent of nesting occurs. Listed as globally endangered by the World Conservation Union, loggerheads have declined dramatically to only 2,000 nesting females per year.

Critical conservation concerns at the Yakushima nesting beaches are related to a growing tourism market since the island was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1993. Eco-tourism is an excellent conservation tool if conducted appropriately. Unfortunately this is not the case at Yakushima, where leadership and capacity of the local government for effective management is sorely lacking. Establishment of proper protocol and rules based on science as well as effective government oversight is urgently needed.

Biologists have observed local eco-tourism guides taking tourists into fenced, protected areas for nesting loggerheads. The result is trampling of nests and high mortality of eggs and hatchlings. Other guides guarantee turtle sightings by digging up nests to uncover hatchlings. Although sea turtles on the beach are protected under national law, other laws and ordinances assure free, unblocked beach access. This means that the local conservation non-governmental organization, Yakushima Umigame-Kan, cannot influence local community activities nor can they enforce national wildlife laws, especially under cover of darkness when many violations occur. Numerous requests have been made to municipal officers and national park rangers to establish policy and proper guidelines for eco-tourism, but to date requests have been ignored to the detriment of these endangered species. The people of Japan eliminated turtle egg harvest during the 1970s, but eco-tourism has become today's modern-day nesting beach threat. To effectively conserve the species, this impact must be addressed.

North Pacific loggerhead sea turtles nest exclusively on beaches in Japan and then migrate across the entire Pacific, passing Hawaii to Mexico, returning to Japan decades later. Fisheries bycatch in coastal fisheries of Mexico and Japan plus international longline fisheries have been identified as leading sources of loggerhead turtle mortality. The Hawaii-based longline fishery, managed by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (WPRFMC), is one of many pelagic fisheries operating in the Central North Pacific that inadvertently interacts with loggerheads during fishing operations. Although the fishery has significantly reduced its loggerhead interaction rates by over 90 percent using best-practice fishing gear technology (circle hooks and fish bait), impacts at other life stages—such as at nesting beaches—persist and are a growing and significant concern.

"Yakushima Island is the most significant loggerhead nesting location in the North Pacific and, in fact, one of the most important locations for this globally endangered species along with populations from Australia, South Africa, Greece, Brazil and the southeastern United States," states Dr. Milani Chaloupka, chair of the WPRFMC Turtle Advisory Committee, an international group of experts. "All efforts should be made to ensure that this site is fully protected."

The WPRFMC has been assisting with conservation efforts since 2004 at critical loggerhead nesting beaches, including Yakushima Island. To date, more than 82,000 hatchlings have been released that would have otherwise been lost without management intervention. For more information, contact Irene Kinan-Kelly, WPRFMC, at Irene.Kinan@noaa.gov or Dr. Yoshimasa Matsuzawa, Sea Turtle Association of Japan, at ymatsu@umigame.org.

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