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## Media Release

For more information or images, contact:  
Irene Kinan (808) 522-8220 or [Irene.Kinan@noaa.gov](mailto:Irene.Kinan@noaa.gov)

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### Long-term Financing Sought for Leatherback Sea Turtle Conservation

HONOLULU (15 July 2007) The Bellagio Sea Turtle Conservation Initiative—a landmark meeting scheduled to convene in Kijal, Terengganu, in Malaysia, July 17-20, 2007—will bring together an internationally diverse group of concerned conservationists, scientists and resource managers to develop a long-term conservation plan for leatherback sea turtles in the Western Pacific Region. This species is listed as critically endangered by the World Conservation Union. The populations are especially vulnerable in the Pacific, where the number of nesting leatherback turtles has plummeted from an estimated 91,000 in 1980 to approximately 5,000 today.

There is certain irony in convening the meeting in Terengganu. This area was once the site of one of the largest leatherback nesting population. However, despite conservation actions, leatherbacks have all but disappeared in Malaysia due in part to over-harvest of eggs. Fortunately, it is not too late for other Western Pacific nesting populations.

“We have the opportunity at this meeting to build consensus on how to prioritize and guide the long-term sustainable management of the remaining leatherback populations in the Region,” states Kitty Simonds, executive director of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, co-host and sponsor of the meeting. “As a fishery management organization, we see ourselves as a significant stakeholder in sea turtle conservation and recovery.”

Conservation and recovery do not take place immediately. Successful conservation requires long-term commitments over many decades by local communities as well as dedication by government, managers and scientists. Urgently needed is a wise management strategy that will maximize nest protection and optimize hatchling production. Sufficient numbers of hatchlings must enter the population each year and sufficient numbers must survive to sexual maturity to reverse population declines. Protection of nests and nesting females on the beach are a vital and necessary component of a holistic approach to recovering depleted leatherback populations, which includes reducing mortality in high seas and coastal fisheries.

Moreover, economic considerations are likely to persist as the driving factor behind in the success of recovery efforts. Developing a long-term financing strategy, such as a trust fund, is vital to the protection of females, hatchlings, and the securing of nesting beaches in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and possibly Malaysia. Reliable funding remains the top concern given that funding to date has been dependent largely on US Congressional appropriations or donations secured by non-governmental organizations. The overriding goal of the meeting is to come to consensus on a long-term financing strategy to provide continuity and thereby ensure the long-term success of conservation actions.

“This is a critical time for these endangered species,” says Dr. Peter Dutton, leader of the Marine Turtle Research Program at the NOAA Fisheries Service Southwest Fisheries Science Center (SWFSC). “Although important and valuable steps have been undertaken over the past few years, without guaranteed long-term funding, we face the very real prospect of losing this initial positive momentum. ... Lapses in funds can easily undo years of hard and important work, while funding uncertainty makes it difficult to engage in long-term planning. ... The survival and ultimate recovery of leatherback turtles is dependent upon our success and creative vision today.”

A press conference for the Bellagio Sea Turtle Conservation Initiative will take place at the Awana Kijal Resort on Friday, July 20 at noon. For additional information or images contact Heidi Gjertsen, NOAA Fisheries SWFSC economist, at [Heidi.Gjertsen@noaa.gov](mailto:Heidi.Gjertsen@noaa.gov).

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## LEATHERBACK FACTS

- *The leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is the largest sea turtle and is the largest living reptile in the world. Mature males and females can be as long as six-and-a-half feet (2 m) and weigh almost 2000 lbs. (900 kg).*
- *The leatherback gets its name from its shell, which is like a thick leathery skin, with the texture of hard rubber. It is also known as leathery turtles.*
- *Like all sea turtles, leatherback turtles have temperature dependent sex determination – the temperature of their nest determines their sex.*
- *Females return to the beach of their 'birth' to lay eggs while males will never again return to land during their approximate 80-year lifetime.*
- *Currently, Jamursba-Medi and Wermon beaches in Papua (Indonesia) host the largest nesting population in the Pacific, with between 1,800 and 3,600 nests laid per season in Jamursba-Medi and approximately 2,500 nests at Wermon. The NGOs, WWF-Indonesia and Yayasan Alam Lestari, employ local villagers to monitor and patrol the beaches, but additional efforts are needed to increase the number of hatchlings that can enter the water each year.*
- *The Huon Coast of the Morobe Province hosts 50 percent of leatherback nesting in Papua New Guinea, but nesting beach impacts are severe due to egg harvesting by villagers; beach erosion and wave inundation (up to 100 percent loss in some places); and predation by village dogs (up to 80 percent of unprotected nests).*
- *In the Solomons, egg collection and the killing of turtles for food have drastically reduced the leatherback nesting population. However, important nesting sites still occur at Isabel Island and at Rendova and Tetapare in the Western Province, and thus population recovery is still possible through dedicated conservation actions.*
- *Although they are air-breathing reptiles born on land, leatherbacks, like all sea turtles, spend their lives in the ocean. Females return to land only to lay their eggs.*
- *Adults ply the seas alone, except on occasion gathering to feed in areas with large numbers of jellyfish. They also forage in coastal waters.*
- *Leatherbacks mate in the waters adjacent to nesting beaches and along migratory corridors. After nesting, female leatherbacks migrate from tropical waters to more temperate latitudes, which support high densities of jellyfish prey in the summer.*
- *They are the most migratory and wide ranging of sea turtles and have some of the longest migrations recorded for any reptile. Individuals tagged in Terengganu have been recaptured in Japan, Hainan Island (China), Taiwan, the Philippines and Kalimantan (Indonesia). Post-nesting female leatherbacks released in Papua (Indonesia) were tracked using satellite technology swimming into waters off Japan, Korea and the Philippines and through the central North Pacific Ocean to California, USA.*
- *Thermoregulatory adaptations such as a counter-current heat exchange system, high oil content, and large body size allow them to maintain a core body temperature higher than that of the surrounding water, thereby allowing them to tolerate colder water temperatures.*
- *They are unique among sea turtles in that their primary food is jellyfish. They also will eat fish, mollusks, squid, sea urchins, and other marine creatures.*

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