



**WESTERN  
PACIFIC  
REGIONAL  
FISHERY  
MANAGEMENT  
COUNCIL**

In some creation myths, the sea turtle is the animal on whose back the world was created. A symbol of longevity, fertility, strength and protection from harm, sea turtles are revered in culture and customs around the globe. Archaeological evidence shows that these “sacred fish” were utilized and revered by humans long before written records were kept.

Coastal populations have exploited sea turtles for their meat, eggs, shell, leather, and oil for centuries. However, the negative effects of unregulated adult and egg harvest, habitat degradation, commercial trade and mortalities through incidental capture in fisheries has accelerated the decline of sea turtle populations. The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by catastrophic declines of sea turtle populations throughout the Pacific Region.

Having endured for millions of years, sea turtle species are now listed as *Endangered*, *Threatened* or *Vulnerable* by the US Endangered Species Act. In the Pacific Ocean, *Endangered* turtles include the hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*). Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) and olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) turtles are listed as *Threatened*, except for olive ridley turtles nesting on the Pacific coast of Mexico which are *Endangered*. Green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) are listed as *Threatened*, with the exception of those nesting on the Pacific coast of Mexico (the black subspecies) which are *Endangered*. The flatback turtle (*Natortor depressus*), native only to Australia, is listed as *Vulnerable*.

The United States continues to dedicate an increasing amount of resources to the preservation of endangered species within our borders. However, conservation and management of sea turtle populations requires more than strongly focused domestic programs. Sea turtles migrate vast distances across ocean basins, living successively in varying life stages on the high seas and within coastal habitats around numerous Pacific nations. Consequently a collaborative approach to management and conservation between nations is essential for the recovery of sea turtle populations.

The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (Council), the federal authority for fisheries in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zones of the western Pacific, has extensive experience in international negotiations and management of highly migratory and shared marine resources. The Council is now in the unique position to bring its experience in international fishery management to support and foster marine turtle conservation.

For this reason, the Council convened the *Western Pacific Sea Turtle Cooperative Research and Management Workshop* in February 2002, and implemented a

comprehensive sea turtle conservation program. Through dialogue with relevant international organizations and renowned sea turtle experts, the Council has acquired direction towards the most efficient use of its resources to aid in the recovery of Pacific sea turtle populations; created momentum to facilitate and strengthen long-term conservation goals; and continues to foster greater collaboration between stakeholders and sea turtle conservation programs in the central and western Pacific.

Recommendations from the Council's Turtle Advisory Committee concluded that the Council's conservation efforts be directed towards international projects with a focus on those species which are of greatest likelihood to interact with the Hawaii-based longline fishery, namely loggerhead and leatherback sea turtles. For leatherback turtles, the emphasis is on the western Pacific leatherback stock because the majority of interactions with the Hawaii-based longline fishery have been with this stock (16 out of 17 sampled turtles have been from the western Pacific stock). Conservation measures for loggerhead turtles focus on the north Pacific (Japanese) stock because all fishery interactions have been with this population.

Five sea turtle conservation measures considered to hold great scientific merit and high conservation value have been integrated into the Council's sea turtle conservation program. These programs involve nesting beach management, emphasize the protection of adults and sub-adults in foraging grounds, and are all implemented by local community based NGO's. Specifically, leatherback nesting beach management and monitoring at Warmon beach in Papua, and at the Kamiali Wildlife Conservation Area, Papua New Guinea; and loggerhead nesting beach assistance in Japan. In addition to nesting beach protection, which is a necessary component of any conservation and recovery program, conservation measures emphasize the reduction of direct harvest and incidental capture. These programs include protection of adult and sub-adult leatherback turtles in foraging grounds at the Kei Kecil Islands, western Papua, and the reduction of incidental capture of juvenile loggerhead turtles in the halibut gillnet fishery of Magdalena Bay, Baja California, Mexico.

The reduction of incidental capture of protected species in longline fisheries remains at the forefront of fishery management objectives for the Council. In addition to implementing conservation measures and supporting research and fishery experiments, assistance has been provided to numerous international sea turtle meetings (including the Annual Sea Turtle Symposia). The Council is also involved in the rehabilitation of SPREP's<sup>1</sup> turtle tagging database through the development of a new *Regional Sea Turtle Tagging Database*. This database is expected to be available by mid 2004 for use and distribution by SPREP and ASEAN-SEAFDEC<sup>2</sup> member countries. Additionally, the Council has coordinated the second and third International Fishers Forums which work to increase awareness and find solutions to reduce protected species interactions with pelagic longline fisheries (IFF3 to convene in early 2005). For detailed information on the Council's sea turtle conservation program, please refer to their web site at [www.wpcouncil.org](http://www.wpcouncil.org).

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<sup>1</sup> South Pacific Regional Environmental Program: 20 member countries

<sup>2</sup> Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center: 10 member countries

# Indo-Pacific marine turtles



*Dermochelys coriacea* (Leatherback turtle)



*Lepidochelys olivacea* (Olive ridley turtle)



*Eretmochelys imbricata* (Hawksbill turtle)



*Caretta caretta* (Loggerhead turtle)



*Natator depressus* (Flatback turtle)



*Chelonia mydas* (Green turtle)



Queensland  
Department of  
Environment and  
Heritage