

The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, Sea Turtle Conservation Program: Institutional Profile



The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council is one of eight Councils established by the US Government in 1976, to manage fisheries in US federal waters (3 to 200 miles from shore). There are five Fishery Management Councils in the Atlantic and three in the Pacific. Our Council comprises Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, and other Pacific remote island areas (Johnston, Wake, Kingman, Midway, Palmyra, Howland, Baker and Jarvis). Our largest fisheries primarily target highly migratory tuna and tuna-like species managed by international cooperation and multi-national negotiations. Under the 1996 Magnuson-Steven's Act, the Council is dedicated to ecosystem based conservation, protection of essential fish habitat, and sustainable fishery management.

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. Due to stringent US endangered species legislation; the continued operations of US pelagic fisheries in the Pacific (one fleet among many which interact with sea turtles) are contingent on the recovery of Pacific sea turtle populations. Although the United States dedicates an increasing amount of resources to the preservation of endangered species, conservation and management of sea turtles requires more than a strongly focused domestic program. Sea turtles are a shared international resource and their management requires cooperation across the Pacific region.

In November 1999, a federal court order severely restricted the Hawaii-based longline fishery due to its interactions with sea turtles, and by March 2001 the swordfish component of the fishery was effectively closed. Although the Western Pacific Council had been working for several years to reduce protected species interactions with Hawaii-based longliners, this closure highlighted the need for a greater focus on sea turtles. The Council has worked in partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries), industry (Hawaii Longline Association) and international collaborators to develop gear modifications and technological solutions to reduce bycatch, implement research to better understand migratory sea turtles, and promote sea turtle conservation activities.

Western Pacific Council, Sea Turtle Conservation Program

In February 2002 the Western Pacific Council convened the *Western Pacific Sea Turtle Cooperative Research & Management Workshop* to initiate direction for their sea turtle conservation program. In May 2003, a full-time coordinator was hired to oversee

the program, and a Turtle Advisor Committee (TAC) was formed to direct and advise the Council in its turtle conservation activities. This TAC is comprised of seven experts who have long-term commitments, exemplary experience and expert knowledge in sea turtle biology, ecology, conservation, management, and oceanography with cumulative expertise of all six Pacific turtle species².

Recommendations from the February 2002 workshop and the TAC 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 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, with emphasis on juvenile loggerheads as this is the life stage with which the fishery interacts.

During the TAC's first meeting, five sea turtle conservation measures were discussed and considered to hold great scientific merit and high conservation value. 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 Council is also involved in the rehabilitation of SPREP's³ 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-SEAFDEC⁴ member countries.

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). Additionally, the Council has coordinated the second and third International Fishers Forums which work to increase awareness and find solutions to reduce bycatch (IFF3 to convene in early 2005). For more detailed information on the Council's sea turtle conservation program and fishery management activities, please refer to their web site at www.wpcouncil.org.

² TAC members include: Dr. Colin Limpus, Mr. George Balazs, Dr. Peter Dutton, Dr. Milani Chaloupka, Dr. Jeffrey Polovina, Dr. Naoki Kamezaki and Ms. Laura Sarti Martinez

³ South Pacific Regional Environmental Program: 20 member countries

⁴ Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center: 10 member countries