



SEA TURTLES IN THE GULF OF MEXICO: THE FACTS

For a large part of their lives, leatherback and loggerhead sea turtles traverse the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean in search of food. After as many as three decades,¹ they will return to nest on the same Gulf Coast beaches where they were born. Surface longline fishing gear makes that return a dangerous trip.

REMARKABLE REPTILES



PHOTO: PAUL MANNIX

There are more interactions between the Gulf of Mexico surface longline fishery and leatherback sea turtles than any other longline fishery on the East Coast.²

Leatherbacks are one of the largest reptiles on Earth.³ Unlike other marine turtles, they have leather-like skin covering their shell. Unique adaptations allow adult leatherbacks to travel as far north as Newfoundland, Canada. They are nourished primarily by jellyfish.⁴

Loggerhead turtles are named for their disproportionately large heads. Adults weigh about 250 pounds and can crush shellfish with their powerful jaws. The most important nesting area in the Western Hemisphere for loggerheads.⁵ Both species spend the majority of their lives in coastal and

offshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean.⁶

THREATS

Leatherbacks and loggerheads are exposed to many threats, including beachfront development and man-made debris. The Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster presented an additional threat to turtles in the Gulf, either directly to the turtles themselves and their eggs or indirectly by contaminating their prey.

In recent years, surface longline gear has been especially detrimental to these species because it catches and kills ocean wildlife creatures indiscriminately. In the Gulf of Mexico, longline fishing vessels set lines an average of 30 miles long with hundreds of baited hooks. The lines, left unattended for hours, use light sticks, which also attract loggerheads.⁷ Many reproductively mature loggerheads and leatherbacks are hooked or entangled,⁸ resulting in serious injury and death.⁹

In 2008, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) surface longline observers recorded 60 leatherback and four loggerhead sea turtle interactions in the Gulf of Mexico. The actual number, however, could be much greater: Observers witnessed only 27 percent of the 2.3 million hooks deployed in 2008.¹⁰ Most of the recorded interactions confirmed injured turtles being released with the hook still imbedded in their skin or beak.

Despite past efforts by NMFS to rebuild sea turtle populations, leatherbacks have been listed as endangered and loggerheads as threatened for more than 30 years under the Endangered Species Act.¹¹ These classifications mean that both species are nearing extinction throughout a significant portion of their range.

THE SOLUTION

The Pew Environment Group is working with a coalition of environmental organizations and recreational fishing groups to end the wasteful and indiscriminate use of surface longline fishing gear. A prohibition of surface longlines in the Gulf of Mexico would be an important step toward the recovery of these federally listed sea turtles. And because there are more selective alternative types of fishing gear, fishermen can still keep fishing.



PHOTO: MITO PAZ

Loggerhead sea turtle, Ambergris Caye, Belize

TAKE ACTION TODAY

We need your support now. Please visit www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfTuna to tell Dr. Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to prohibit surface longline gear in the Gulf of Mexico.

- 1 NMFS, "Loggerhead Life History Parameters Used in Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*) 2009 Status Review," Table: Stage Durations; Avens, L., et al., "Use of skeletochronological analysis to estimate the age of leatherback sea turtles *Dermochelys coriacea* in the Western North Atlantic," *Endangered Species Research* 8: 165-77 (October 2009), p. 173, www.int-res.com/articles/esr2009/8/n008p165.pdf.
- 2 Garrison, L.P., et al., *Estimated Bycatch of Marine Mammals and Sea Turtles in the U.S. Atlantic Pelagic Longline Fleet During 2008*. NOAA Technical Memorandum NOAA NMFS-SEFSC-591: 63, p. 21.
- 3 NMFS, "Leatherback Turtle," accessed online 22 April 2010. www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/leatherback.htm.
- 4 *Ibid.*; James, M.C., et al., "Identification of high-use habitat threats to leatherback sea turtles in northern waters: New directions for conservation," *Ecology Letters* (2005), p. 195, www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/118669292/abstract.
- 5 NMFS, *op. cit.*, "Loggerhead Turtle."
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Wang, J.H., et al., "Behavioral responses of sea turtles to light sticks used in longline fisheries," *Animal Conservation* 10(2): May 2007, p. 181, www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/117970034/abstract.
- 8 Lewison, R.L., and Crowder, L.B., "Putting Longline Bycatch of Sea Turtles Into Perspective," *Conservation Biology* 21(1): 79-86 (2007), p. 80, <http://bycatch.env.duke.edu/publicationsandreports/Lewison2007.pdf>.
- 9 Garrison, *op. cit.* p. 9.
- 10 Garrison, *op. cit.* pp. 8, 21.
- 11 NMFS, "Marine Turtles Species Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)," accessed online 22 April 2010. www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/loggerhead.htm#status.

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For additional resources, visit us at www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfTuna.

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