30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

GREEN SEA TURTLE

Green sea turtles are among the oldest reptiles on earth; the turtle's ancestors began gracing the seas 150 million years ago. The periphery of the green sea turtle's range can extend as far north as New York, though it is found mainly in tropical areas of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. Several factors contributed to the species' decline, and the Endangered Species Act has been an important tool to ensure that green sea turtles survive for millions more years.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

Historically, green sea turtles were coveted as a meat high in protein. Later, turtle meat became a delicacy, and green sea turtles became commercially important for cosmetics and leather.

Green sea turtles nest on open beaches that are vulnerable to erosion, storms, human traffic, and development. Lights from vacation resorts along the coast bewilder breeding females, discouraging them from coming ashore. The lights also disorient hatchlings, luring them away from the ocean.

Green sea turtles can mistake pollution, such as plastic bags and styrofoam, for food that, when consumed, interferes with digestion and can poison the turtles with toxic chemicals.


Ryan Hagerty/FWS

In recent history, commercial fishermen have had the most devastating effect on green turtles, which are often snared by fishing gear intended for other species. Longlines and fishing nets entangle turtles, drowning them because they are unable to rise to the surface to breathe.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

In 1978, green sea turtles were listed as endangered in Florida and along the Pacific coast of Mexico and threatened in the rest of their extensive range. To comply with the Endangered Species Act, Turtle Excluder Devices have been added to fishing nets in order to allow sea turtles to escape.


David Vogel/FWS

Lighting ordinances have been enacted in areas surrounding vital green turtle nesting grounds, particularly in Florida.

CONSERVATION TODAY

Habitat acquisition and protection have been fundamental in the green sea turtle's turnaround. The National Marine Fisheries Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state governmental agencies, and conservation groups have teamed up to recover green sea turtles. In Florida, the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge was established to protect one of the most productive nesting grounds in the world for green sea turtles. Thirty-five percent of the world's remaining green sea turtle population nests on the twenty mile stretch of beach within the refuge. Since the refuge's designation in 1991, green turtle nests have gone from zero in 1982 to a remarkable 2,970 nests in 2002.

ECOLOGICAL VALUE

The problems facing green sea turtles—development, pollution, and poor regulation of the fishing industry—do not affect turtles alone. The best available science shows that ecosystems are intricately intertwined. Therefore, near extinction of green sea turtles could decimate other species that depend on them for survival in a chain reaction that ends with the break down of the entire ecosystem.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The success of green sea turtles in Florida's Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge demonstrates that habitat protections play a critical role in species recovery. It also underscores the importance of protecting more of the turtle's breeding grounds. As population growth explodes in Florida and throughout the south, there will be continuous pressure to develop more and more of the turtle's habitat. The Endangered Species Act remains one of the only mechanisms available for the on-going protection of the turtle.

There is also a need to further reform fishing practices to reduce the unintended capture of sea turtles by longlines and fishing nets. Fishermen often throw back into the ocean as much as a quarter of their catch, which frequently includes green sea turtles.


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