

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

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DATE: December 10, 2002

TO: Coastal Commissioners and Interested Public

FROM: Peter M. Douglas, Executive Director *PD*
Sarah Christie, Legislative Coordinator

SUBJECT: RESOLUTION SUPPORTING THE CONSERVATION OF SEA TURTLES

Note: This information can be accessed through the Commission's World Wide Web
Homepage at www.coastal.ca.gov

I. BACKGROUND

At the Coastal Commission's November, 2002 meeting, members of the international non-profit organization Wildcoast asked the Commission to adopt a resolution in support of efforts to protect California's sea turtles, and provided staff with a draft resolution. Wildcoast is conducting a public education campaign to raise awareness of the fact that California's coastal waters support four different species of endangered sea turtles, and highlight some of the human-induced threats to species survival. The Commission directed staff to prepare a resolution reflecting those concerns for the December meeting.

II. NATURAL HISTORY

Four of the world's seven species of sea turtles frequent the California Coast and are listed as endangered or threatened pursuant to the US Endangered Species Act. These include the Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) and the Green (*Chelonia mydas*). These species migrate between California and Central America, Japan, Indonesia and Mexico, respectively. Leatherback turtles are the largest living reptile on earth, and the most critically endangered.

Sea turtles are among the longest lived of all reptiles, with some species living up to 100 years. They reach reproductive maturity between 15-30 years of age, and require remote, sandy beaches for digging shallow nests and laying their eggs. It is estimated that 1 in 3,000 eggs will produce an individual that will mature to reproductive age.

Sea turtles are nomadic, and regularly traverse the world's oceans, routinely traveling thousands of miles between feeding and nesting grounds. Sea turtles feed on a variety of jellyfish, crustaceans, mollusks, plankton, algae, urchins, starfish, sponges and fish, depending on the species.

III. ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

According to a report by the National Academy of Sciences, shrimp trawling kills an average of 150,000 sea turtles per year. Long line fishing kills another 40,000. Ingestion of plastic debris, brine discharge, ocean pollution, commercial harvesting of turtle eggs and loss of beach nesting habitat due to development also contribute to accelerating population decline worldwide.

Of these various factors, shrimp trawling is by far the most detrimental to turtle populations. By-catch of sea turtles can be reduced by 97% by the installation of a Turtle Excluder Device (TED), a simple grate placed at the mouth of the net that allows shrimp, but not turtles, to pass into the net. All US shrimpers are required to use shrimp nets outfitted with TEDs.

In 1995, the US Endangered Species Act was amended to require all nations that export shrimp to the US to have laws requiring similar devices on shrimp nets. As a result, 16 countries followed suit, in order to comply with the "Turtle-Shrimp Law" and gain access to the US market. However, four nations challenged the law before the World Trade Organization as an unfair barrier to free trade. A WTO panel concluded that within the WTO charter, environmental protection provisions cannot be invoked if they interfere with the overall goal of increasing free trade. The State Department responded to this ruling by revising the Turtle-Shrimp law to weaken its provisions.

Although all seven species of sea turtles are listed as endangered, threatened or vulnerable pursuant to the Endangered Species Act or international conservation treaties, scientists project that the leatherback could go extinct within the next decade, followed by others if immediate steps are not taken to protect existing populations and critical habitat. Because of their global migratory patterns, sea turtle conservation will depend on international cooperation.

IV. RECOMMENDED ACTION

Staff recommends that the Commission adopt the attached resolution supporting the conservation of sea turtles and urging members of the public and responsible agencies to take appropriate actions that contribute to conservation goals.

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RESOLUTION BY THE CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

IN SUPPORT OF THE CONSERVATION OF ENDANGERED SEA TURTLES

Whereas: The California Coastal Commission was established by the People of California through initiative statute in 1972 and made permanent in 1976 by the California Legislature as the State's principal coastal management agency with diverse responsibilities, including but not limited to, "...ensur(ing) conformity with the provisions of...(the California Coastal Act),...to protect regional, state and national interests in assuring the maintenance of the long-term productivity and economic vitality of coastal resources necessary for the well-being of the people of the state...;"

Whereas: The California Coastal Act also provides that in order "...to avoid long-term costs to the public and a diminished quality of life resulting from the misuse of coastal resources, to coordinate and integrate the activities of the many agencies whose activities impact the coastal zone, and to supplement their activities in matters not properly within the jurisdiction of any existing agency, it is necessary to provide for continued state coastal planning and management through a state coastal commission;"

Whereas: California's coastal waters provide critical habitat for four of the seven species of sea turtles, including leatherback, loggerhead, olive ridley and green sea turtles;

Whereas: All of the world's sea turtle species are listed as endangered, threatened or vulnerable pursuant to the US endangered Species Act or international treaties;

Whereas: Sea turtles are part of California's natural heritage and marine biodiversity, are valued and appreciated by people of all cultural backgrounds, and as such possess inestimable intrinsic value to current and future generations;

Whereas: All species of sea turtles migrate through the world's oceans and are sensitive to pollution, thermal discharge, industrial fishing techniques, and habitat loss on a global scale;

Whereas: Longline fishing and shrimp trawling without Turtle Excluder Devices (TED) kills approximately 190,000 turtles every year;

Whereas: The illegal trade in turtle meat, particularly in Southern California, violates both United States and Mexican law and is contributing to the decline of Pacific sea turtle species;

Whereas: The World Trade Organization's rejection of the United States' requirement that all shrimp exported to the U.S. must be "turtle-safe" has perpetuated the needless slaughter of sea turtles world wide by removing the economic incentives for international shrimp trawlers to install TEDs in their nets;

Whereas: Consumer habits, government actions and human activities along the California coast affect the integrity of coastal ecosystems upon which sea turtles depend for life;

Therefore be it Resolved: That the California Coastal Commission hereby expresses its commitment to conserve these magnificent and long-lived creatures by ensuring to the maximum extent possible that California's coastal waters shall remain biologically productive and healthy enough to support viable populations of sea turtles;

Be it Further Resolved: That the California Coastal Commission urges the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to work closely with Mexican law enforcement and resource agencies to halt the illegal trade in endangered sea turtle meat and byproducts;

Be it Further Resolved: That the California Coastal Commission urges consumers and retailers to follow sustainable seafood guidelines such as those published by the Audubon Society and the Monterey Bay Aquarium. These guidelines identify seafood choices that are harvested in sustainable numbers and in a manner that does not result in turtle by-catch;

Be it Further Resolved: That the California Coastal Commission urges the public and responsible government agencies to reduce the discharge of trash into ocean waters and marine debris that contributes to sea turtle mortality through accidental ingestion and entrapment;

Be it Further Resolved: That the California Coastal Commission commends and encourages lawful efforts by non-governmental organizations to challenge the World Trade Organization's interpretation of the international TED policies that are contributing to global declines in sea turtle populations.

Sara Wan, Chair
California Coastal Commission

Dave Potter, Vice-Chair
California Coastal Commission

Date

Date