

The Green Line

Turtle advocates knit first stitches of tri-national network

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A friend I recently joined for supper reminded me of the time she took me to a seafood restaurant to show me that it still served sea turtle soup even though Mexico banned trade in sea turtles and their byproducts in 1990. That also showed me that laws aren't enough to preserve biodiversity. Awareness is key, and fortunately it is increasing.

The endangered Pacific loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*) has been swimming, courting and mating along a 12,000-kilometer (7,500-mile) migration route between Mexico, Hawaii and Japan for centuries. Only this month are proposals due from a group of fishermen, scientists and school children who banded together to form a trinational strategy to reduce the alarming mortality of this awe-inspiring critter.

Making history, a Mexican delegation followed the loggerhead's route across the Pacific Ocean, where participants attended the 17th Annual Japan Sea Turtle Symposium in Kumano, as well as visiting nesting beaches and the Hiwasa Sea Turtle Museum with its founder, none other than Yasuo Kondoh, the world's most venerable sea turtle conservation expert.

Lack of biological data on loggerheads makes management and population recovery efforts difficult. This much is known about them: The survivors of the ancient species live 30 to 50 years; grow up to three feet in length, or about one meter long; and easily weigh 250 pounds (113 kilograms) if they make it to adulthood. But only one or two out of a hatch of a 100 make it.

Loggerhead populations are declining in Mexico, Japan, Honduras, Panama, Colombia, Bahamas, Cuba, Israel, Turkey, and Greece. The waning numbers are mainly due to incidental capture in fishing gear, intentional hunting, coastal development and other increased human use of nesting beaches, including pollution emissions.

Specific threats include loss or degradation of nesting habitat; artificial beachfront lighting that disorients hatchlings; nest robberies by human and other predators; degradation of foraging habitat; marine debris; watercraft strikes, and disease. But incidental take from trawling, longline, gill net and other fisheries — both commercial and subsistence — is probably the worst problem.

Mexican sea turtle protectors have dubbed the loggerhead as an ambassador because its migratory condition can bring together coastal communities around the Pacific Rim for the sake of conservation. Protecting nesting beaches or migration areas in just one country is not sufficient to keep the turtles out of jeopardy in another.

Neither are the international agreements and national laws that protect the species. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) lists it in Appendix 1. But much remains to be known about it and to be done for its continued existence.

From Nov. 17 to 29, turtle advocates exchanged experiences and knit the first stitches of a trans-Pacific network for reducing loggerhead death. U.S. and Japanese cooperation is expected for making a documentary film on the experiences of three Mexican fishermen from Baja California

Sur state convinced of the importance in preserving the turtle species.

While fishermen of the Hawaiian Longline Association explained their method of reducing the turtle by-catch 95 percent, Japanese Sea Turtle Association members revealed that their country has a long and strong tradition of protecting the species because it is deemed a messenger of the sea god and so is welcomed with pride to nesting areas.

The encounters highlighted the fact that conservation begins with fishing communities and coordination among them. Participants were inspired. They undertook a project for school children to swap sea turtle art and messages across the ocean. They discussed plans for the 2007 annual sea turtle protectors meeting in Loreto, Baja California Sur. They also planned for two festivals next year on Mexico's northwest coast to increase awareness about the loggerhead and other endangered sea turtles.

They noted that population decline of Pacific loggerheads suggests the Gulf of California region should be included as a target area for protection efforts. The government agencies and community groups that are raising awareness in the region now deserve recognition and support for their efforts to link the area's needs with those of the rest of the Pacific.

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