

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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CRITICAL HABITAT FOR HAWKSBILL SEA TURTLE IN PUERTO RICO PROPOSED

Critical habitat for the Puerto Rican population of the endangered hawksbill sea turtle has been proposed by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director, announced today.

The proposal, published in the May 24, 1978, Federal Register was made to ensure the integrity of beaches on Isla Mona and Culebra Island-- areas used by significant numbers of nesting turtles. Interested persons have until July 23, 1978, to comment on the proposal.

The hawksbill sea turtle is a rare and critically endangered species found throughout the world in tropical seas. Much of the hope for its survival and recovery depends upon the maintenance of suitable and undisturbed nesting beaches. The Service recognizes that areas containing such beaches may qualify for recognition as critical habitat as referred to in Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Under that Act, no Federal agency could authorize, fund, or carry out any action which might affect the critical habitat of listed species.

Green sea turtles as well as hawksbills are known to nest on all of Mona Island, which is already listed as critical habitat for three other endangered species--the Mona ground iguana, Mona boa, and yellow-shouldered blackbird. Offshore areas appear to support a somewhat stable and resident population of hawksbills.

Nesting also occurs on suitable sandy beaches on the north shore of Culebra Island as well as on the nearby islands of Cayo Norte and Isla Culebrita. The rich offshore reefs provide a good feeding area for the species. Occasional nesting has also been reported for leatherback, loggerhead, and green sea turtles on these beaches. The critical habitat for the endangered giant anole, a large lizard, overlaps the proposed critical habitat of the hawksbill on Playa Resaca.

The hawksbill sea turtle occurs in waters off the east coast of the continental United States, the U.S. Virgin Islands, mainland Puerto Rico, Hawaiian Islands, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Marianas. Nesting is known to occur in Florida and the Virgin Islands, and it may take place in other areas under U.S. jurisdiction. However, not enough information is presently available on other areas to include specific nesting beaches in this proposal.

All comments on this proposal should be sent to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (OES), Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

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