

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

For Release September 25, 1978

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## NEWLY DISCOVERED SEA TURTLE NESTING BEACH PROTECTED

The United States has protected a recently discovered nesting area on St. Croix for the world's heaviest reptile, the leatherback sea turtle, by listing Sandy Point Beach in St. Croix of the U.S. Virgin Islands as part of its critical habitat, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

The leatherback sea turtle is a rare and critically endangered reptile found in scattered locations throughout the world. The sea turtles, which can reach 1,200 pounds and 5 feet, require sloping sandy beaches with at least a foot of dry sand above the moisture level in areas where deepwater is close to shore.

Much of the hope for the survival and recovery of this species depends upon the maintenance of suitable and undisturbed nesting beaches. Such beaches qualify for recognition as critical habitat under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. That Act directs that no Federal agency may authorize, fund, or carry out any action that could adversely affect critical habitat of an endangered species.

During the summer of 1977, the Fish and Wildlife Service became aware of a newly discovered nesting site of leatherbacks on the western end of St. Croix. Various government agencies, including the Service, conducted observations and found 86 leatherback nests in addition to evidence of egg poaching and potential development. Nesting activity was seen to occur on the 1.9 mile long by .2 mile wide strip of Sandy Point Beach. This small area constitutes the only known beach in lands under U.S. jurisdiction that is used extensively for nesting by the endangered leatherbacks.

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INT 6052-78  
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