

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

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SEA TURTLES TO BE ADDED TO THREATENED LIST

Three more species of sea turtles, that ancient family of reptiles which lived in the days of dinosaurs, have been pushed closer to extinction because of increased development of coastal shorelines and overuse for commercial purposes.

The green (Chelonia mydas), loggerhead (Caretta caretta), and Pacific ridley (Lepidochelys olivacea) sea turtles have been proposed in the Federal Register to be added to the U.S. List of Threatened Wildlife by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, and the National Marine Fisheries Service, a unit of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce. The proposal came after a joint status review by both agencies found seriously decreased populations of these species throughout the world. The leatherback, hawksbill, and Atlantic ridley sea turtles are already on the U.S. List of Endangered Wildlife.

Sea turtles, which can grow to 1,500 pounds, rarely come on land except to lay eggs. Human development of coastal areas for industry and tourism has destroyed many of these nesting sites. Along some shorelines, bright city and highway lights confuse hatchlings and attract them inland where they die.

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The green sea turtle is probably the most commercially valuable reptile in the world and one of the most heavily hunted. Its meat, eggs, and calipee (cartilage used in soup) have been eaten for centuries, its skin has been used for leather, its shell has been used for jewelry, and its oil has been used in the cosmetics industry. An international market in turtle products now exists, with the United States being among the largest consumers.

In the last few years there has been a rise in the commercial take of the Pacific ridley, stimulated by the development of a market for turtle leather, partly as a substitute for alligator hides.

Both the green and loggerhead are found around the world with some populations nesting on various shores and coastal islands in the South-eastern United States and its territories and possessions. The Pacific ridley also nests in many parts of the world, but is not known to nest in the continental United States.

Although most States where the turtles are found protect the reptiles, other countries either permit or cannot prevent the commercial taking of turtles and eggs. The lack of restrictions on importing turtle products into this country may be encouraging this exploitation.

If adopted, the new regulations would prohibit the taking, import, and export of the species and would halt the United States involvement in the sale in interstate and foreign commerce of these turtles and products made from them.

There would be certain exceptions to the prohibitions. Sea turtles could be taken by permit for scientific purposes, enhancement of propagation, or survival. The incidental catch of sea turtles during fishing or research activities would be exempted provided that the turtles were immediately returned to the sea and that the fishing was not taking place in an area of substantial breeding and feeding by these species. Permits would be authorized for mariculture operations (scientific breeding and raising of sea creatures for commercial use) for two years if there is a showing of significant progress toward a goal of creating a captive breeding population that is completely self-sustaining and independent of wild stocks. After two years permits would be available only if turtles were taken from captive bred populations completely self-sustaining and independent of wild stocks. Certain live specimens and products held on the date of the regulatory proposal would be exempted from the prohibition.

The prohibition on interstate commerce would not take effect until one year after the regulations become effective, thereby allowing owners to distribute inventory lawfully possessed. Permits would also be available for economic hardship.

Final promulgation of sea turtle regulations by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service will take into consideration all comments received within 60 days from governmental agencies, interested citizens, and other groups. Written comments, views, and objections should be submitted, preferably in triplicate, to the Director (FWS/LE), Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.