

# Northeast Distant Fishery Sea Turtle Bycatch Reduction Project

## Sea Turtle Bycatch: A Shared Global Problem

### FACT SHEET

**Bycatch** is the unintentional catch of any marine life by fishermen. It occurs when fishing methods are not perfectly selective to catch only the desired size, sex, quality, and quantity of target species. Very few commercial fishing methods in the world meet this criterion, and bycatch does not always survive upon release. This inadvertent, but wasteful loss of marine life is contributing to population declines and resulting in more stringent fishery regulations around the world. This trend is neither ecologically nor economically sustainable in the long-term.

Scientists working for the United States government have been developing methods to make commercial fishing gear more selective in order to conserve fish populations and protect marine mammals and sea turtles. The biggest concerns of late have been the entanglement and hooking of sea turtles in pelagic longline gear and entrapment of large loggerhead and leatherbacks in shrimp trawl nets. The U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service requires turtle excluder devices and bycatch reduction devices in shrimp trawl nets, and has a system in place for closing fishing grounds when turtles congregate in a given area. As the agency refines its oversight in these areas, it has been studying methods to minimize sea turtle bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries, with the intent of sharing this research with other countries to address sea turtle bycatch on a global scale.

Sea turtles migrate over vast distances, across national and international boundaries. It is the collective responsibility of many nations to promote the protection, conservation and recovery of sea turtle populations and their habitats. International cooperation is vital in order for any viable conservation effort to work.

NOAA Fisheries has addressed sea turtle bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries with full and partial closures of certain fisheries, as well as gear deployment restrictions.

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**“It is much easier for the United States to export viable bycatch reduction technology than to export fishery closures.”**

-- Dr. Rebecca Lent, Deputy Director  
National Marine Fisheries Service

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Federal scientists and managers are actively working with fishermen to minimize longline commercial fishery bycatch through methods other than closures of the pelagic longline fisheries, which have considerable impacts on fishermen and their communities.

Through the Northeast distant fishery project, government and fishermen partnered with private industry to determine which bait and hook combinations successfully avoided sea turtles. Results of this research show that fishermen can reduce the encounters with leatherback and loggerhead sea turtles by 65 – 90 percent. The three-year experiment also resulted in the development of several tools and techniques fishermen can use to dehook and release turtles that are accidentally caught.

### **International Treaty on Sea Turtle Conservation: Protecting the “Ambassadors of the Sea”**

In addition to regulating domestic fisheries and conducting research to minimize sea turtle bycatch, the United States is a member nation of the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles, along with Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Netherlands, Peru, United States, and Venezuela. The Convention ([www.seaturtle.org](http://www.seaturtle.org)) is the only international treaty dedicated exclusively to sea turtles, setting standards for the conservation of these endangered animals and their habitats. It entered into force on May 2, 2001.