

Northeast Distant Fishery Sea Turtle Bycatch Reduction Project

Project Background

FACT SHEET

NOAA Fisheries has completed three years of research in cooperation with American fishermen in the high seas off Newfoundland. The purpose of this three-year endeavor, which began in 2001, was to determine if and how pelagic longline fisheries could avoid accidental capture of sea turtles, and to engineer new devices fishermen could use to successfully disentangle and dehook turtles that could not be avoided in order to improve the post-hooking survival rate.

All six species of sea turtles are either threatened or endangered. By law, we must minimize adverse human impacts on sea turtle populations. We are a society that values the existence of these ancient animals, yet turtle populations are on the decline worldwide. One of our jobs at NOAA Fisheries is to monitor and regulate the activities of American fishing vessels that come in contact with sea turtles so we do not contribute to further population declines.

Over the past several years, we've made great strides in reducing sea turtle bycatch – or accidental catch – in American shrimp trawl nets by requiring turtle excluder devices. Just last year, the requirement for larger TEDs was implemented. These devices reduce the potential for drowning by allowing turtles to exit fishing nets through an escape flap while the net is being towed.

We also have a problem with sea turtle bycatch in our pelagic longline fisheries. We have recently addressed this problem by closing fishing grounds to American longliners, in the Western Pacific off Hawaii, and in the Northwestern Atlantic, an area known as the Grand Banks, off Newfoundland.

Because U.S. longliners account for only about six percent of the international longline effort in the Atlantic Ocean, excluding American vessels in the Grand Banks has limited impact in reducing sea turtle bycatch if other nations continue to fish in the same area without the use of bycatch reduction methods and gear.

So in 2001, we launched this research project to find ways in which longline fishermen could avoid catching sea turtles and to develop gear that would aid in the safe handling, dehooking, disentangling, and ultimately, the safe release of those turtles that could not be avoided.

Throughout the three years, we have forged unprecedented partnerships between government, the fishing industry, private sector, environmental groups, and in many cases, our international counterparts to find what we believe will be the future of sea turtle conservation throughout the world, in all fisheries.

