

Marine Turtle Conservation Fund

On July 2nd, 2004, the Marine Turtle Conservation Act of 2004 (Act) was signed into law by the United States Congress. The legislation was enacted to ensure the long-term survival of these imperiled species, by assisting in the conservation of marine turtles and their nesting habitats in foreign countries.

Marine turtles — much beloved species around the world — are truly the ancient mariners of the world's oceans with ancestors dating back over 100 million years. Seven species of marine turtles currently navigate the oceans. While all species require tropical, subtropical or temperate oceanic beaches for nesting, each has specific marine habitat and feeding requirements.

Six marine turtles are considered imperiled by the World Conservation Union: The green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), the leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), the loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), the hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), the Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*), and the olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). Only the flatback turtle (*Natator depressus*), which occurs in the near shore and inshore waters of Australia, is not currently considered endangered.

All marine turtle species require many years to reach sexual maturity (10-40 years depending on the species), have complex life cycles, depend on oceanic beaches for nesting, specific marine foraging habitats, and are very vulnerable to human exploitation as well as human caused degradation of their habitats.

Once abundant, marine turtle populations in the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, are a fraction of their levels prior to human over-exploitation. Major threats on nesting beaches include legal or illegal over-exploitation of eggs or meat, depredation of eggs

by natural predators as well as dogs and domestic hogs, light pollution from developments which disorients hatchlings and nesting females, and coastal riprap, sea walls, revetments, sand bags or other hard structures. Major threats in the marine environment include legal directed fisheries for marine turtles in some countries, accidental capture by trawl, net and long-line commercial fisheries, and destruction or degradation of grass beds and coral reefs.

While long-term conservation efforts are showing success for some species or populations such as the Kemp's ridley, other nesting populations such as those for East Pacific leatherbacks have crashed and face imminent extinction. The Act was established in recognition of the global plight of marine turtles and need for increased conservation efforts on nesting beaches throughout the world. The Act establishes a dedicated fund administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) to support

a range of conservation efforts protecting nesting populations and beaches in foreign countries.

Because marine turtles are highly migratory and far ranging species, successful conservation requires long-term efforts and close cooperation among countries sharing the same oceans. While the Service has a long history of working with other countries on marine turtle conservation, the fund will build new partnerships with governments, non-government organizations, and the private sector to achieve this goal.

The Act provides the Service with a timely and important opportunity to expand existing efforts and support for on-the-ground conservation initiatives on behalf of the world's imperiled marine turtles. It is a responsibility that the Service and its many conservation partners will take very seriously to help save these ancient and charismatic species.



Green sea turtle returning to sea after nesting
USFWS/Earl Possardt

The 2007 Congressional appropriation of \$700,000, which leveraged over \$900,000 in matching funds and in-kind donations from other marine turtle stakeholders, allowed the Service to fund 22 innovative marine turtle conservation projects, including:

- Supporting community based conservation programs in Quang Tri Province, Vietnam to recover a once significant but now remnant leatherback nesting population along Vietnam's central coast.
- Strengthening international cooperation and collaboration on sea turtle research, management practices and conservation efforts by aiding in the assembly of more than 900 sea turtle specialists from around the world at the 27th Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation. In particular, providing travel grants to specialists from developing nations who could not otherwise afford to attend.
- Supporting management of leatherback nesting at Jarnurba Medi and Warmon Beaches in Papua, Indonesia, the largest remaining nesting leatherback population in the West Pacific. The focus of this project is monitoring of the leatherback nesting population, hatchling production, threats, development of a threat mitigation protocol and to ensure the effective involvement of local communities in the recovery program for West Pacific leatherback nesting populations.
- Support for community based nesting beach conservation program to restore the Chiriqui Beach hawksbill nesting population once the largest hawksbill nesting colony in the Wider Caribbean. Involves a partnership of scientists, NGOs, government and Nogbe Indian communities.
- Monitoring and protecting hawksbill turtle nesting activity in the Pearl Keys in Nicaragua while simultaneously developing turtle-based ecotourism for the benefit of the community. This project provides for daily hawksbill turtle nest surveys as well as a training course for local community members involved in tourist turtle-watching activities.
- Developing a well-coordinated and strategic approach to monitor and protect leatherback nesting activity on the coast of Gabon, which hosts one of the two largest remaining nesting populations for this species. This project includes conducting aerial surveys of leatherback nesting sites as well as implementing field projects to survey and protect marine turtle nests.
- Supporting ranger training and capacity building for the Oman Ministry of Environment's marine turtle conservation program. The Sultanate of Oman is home to the world's largest nesting aggregation of loggerheads as well as one of the three largest green turtle nesting populations.

Marine Turtle Conservation Funding History from 2005 through 2007	
Total Number of Grant Proposals Received	203
Total Number of Grants Awarded	54
Total Amount Appropriated by U.S. Congress	\$1,478,400
Total Funds Distributed through Grants	\$1,331,759
Total Funds to Administration of Grants	\$146,641
Total Matching/In-kind Funds Leveraged by Grants	\$2,536,651

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
International Affairs
Division of International Conservation
4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 100
Arlington, VA 22203
703-358-1754
703-358-2115/fax
internationalconservation@fws.gov
http://www.fws.gov/international
www.fws.gov
CFDA# 15.645

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Satellite tagged loggerhead returning to sea after nesting USFWS/Earl Possardt



Loggerhead sea turtle hatchling USFWS



Hawksbill sea turtle
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