

Marine Turtle Conservation Fund



Marine turtles are truly the ancient mariners of the world's oceans with ancestors dating back more than 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 unique marine habitat and feeding requirements.

Six of the seven marine turtle species are listed in threatened categories by the World Conservation Union: 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 listed as data deficient. All marine turtle species except the flatback are also listed as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

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, require specific marine foraging habitats, and are very vulnerable to human exploitation as well as degradation of their habitats.

Once abundant, marine turtle populations are at a fraction of their levels prior to human over-exploitation. Major threats on nesting beaches include legal or illegal poaching of eggs or meat, depredation of eggs by natural predators as well as dogs and feral hogs, light pollution from developments which disorients hatchlings and nesting females, and coastal riprap, sea walls, revetments, sand bags, or other hard structures.

Marine turtles are also subject to man made disasters involving the world's oceans and beaches such as oil spills. Major threats in the marine environment include legal directed fisheries for marine turtles in some countries, accidental capture in artesian gill nets, commercial trawl nets and long line fisheries.

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.

In 2004, the United States Congress passed the Marine Turtle Conservation Act (MTCA). 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. The Act was established in recognition of the global plight of marine turtles and the need for increased conservation efforts on nesting beaches throughout the world.

The Act establishes a dedicated fund to support a range of conservation efforts protecting nesting populations and beaches in foreign countries and now supports projects in more than 25 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 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a long history of working with other countries on marine turtle conservation, the fund enables the Service to build new partnerships with governments, non-governmental 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 on-the-ground conservation initiatives on behalf of the world's marine turtles. It is a responsibility that the Service and its many conservation partners take very seriously to help save these ancient and charismatic species.



A green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) returns to see after nesting at Ras al Jinz, Oman
Credit: E. Possardt/USFWS

In 2013, Wildlife Without Borders supported 45 projects from the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund with \$1.7 million, which was leveraged by \$2.2 million in matching and in-kind funds. These funds supported innovative marine turtle conservation projects, including:

- In partnership with the Charles Darwin Foundation, this project supports efforts to establish an integrated long-term conservation program for the East Pacific green turtles in the Galapagos National Park. Population trends will be monitored and key threats will be assessed to determine appropriate management responses from the park.
- Conserve the largest remaining hawksbill nesting population in the Eastern Pacific at three sites in El Salvador covering 23 miles of beach. The Ocean Foundation addresses local threats to turtles such as illegal blast fishing by training law enforcement personnel and working with communities to adopt sustainable fishing practices.
- In partnership with the wildlife Conservation Society, this project supports nesting beach conservation programs for the



Data collection and tagging a nesting leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), in Kingere, Pongara National Park, Gabon. Credit: Gabon Sea Turtle Partnership

largest leatherback nesting populations in the world through an alliance of National Park, NGO, and local community participants in Gabon. The grant also supports the National Commission for national parks to increase its capacity to address substantial sea turtle bycatch from legal and illegal coastal fisheries within and adjacent to coastal national parks.

- In partnership with the TREE Foundation this project supports community-based sea turtle conservation projects along 45 miles of nesting beaches on the Bay of Bengal, in Bengaladesh involving 30 villages. Conservation efforts include nesting survey and protection activities, outreach to fishing communities to address sea turtle bycatch which impacts the major olive ridley arribada nesting populations.
- Strengthen nest surveys and protection at the four primary leatherback nesting beaches which account for over 40% of leatherback nesting in the Pacific in Mexico. The grantee Kutzari operates turtle camps at the four main nesting beaches of Cahuitan, Tierra Colorada, Mexiquillo and Barra de la Cruz, and conducts daily and nightly patrols along these beaches to protect nests from poaching, depredation and tidal inundation.
- Support nesting beach conservation programs for the three most important East Pacific leatherback populations in Nicaragua and a hawksbill conservation program



Ngobe children watch a satellite tagged hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) return to the sea, Chiriqui Beach, Panama Credit: Sea Turtle Conservancy

at the recently discovered nesting site at Estero Padre Ramos. This site accounts for 40-50% of all East Pacific hawksbill nesting. The grantee Fauna and Flora International will work closely with local communities and stakeholders as partners in the conservation programs.

- In partnership with the Yemeni Biological Society, this project strengthens sea turtle conservation efforts in key loggerhead, green and hawksbill nesting habitat in Yemen. Community sea turtle protection teams will establish and implement standardized monitoring efforts. Outreach and education activities will also be conducted working with local tribal leaders in communities adjacent to key nesting beaches.

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Marine Turtle Conservation Funding from 2007 through 2013	
Total Number of Grant Proposals Received	637
Total Number of Grants Awarded	273
Total Funds Distributed through Grants	\$10,856,576*
Total Matching/In-kind Funds Leveraged by Grants	\$15,475,920

*Amount includes funds from USAID/CARPE, and the Save Vanishing Species Stamp