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NOAA to conduct status review of green turtles, consider management of Hawaii turtles as distinct population segment
Agency accepting public comment

NOAA's Fisheries Service announced today that it will work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to conduct a global status review of green turtles, which have been listed under the federal Endangered Species Act since 1978.

As part of this review, NOAA and FWS will also assess whether Hawaii's green turtles should be listed as a distinct population segment (DPS), and if so, whether they should be removed from the list of species protected under the ESA.

This decision was prompted by a recent petition from the Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs, and is consistent with recommendations from NOAA's most recent 5-year review of the species, completed in 2007. That 5-year review recommended a global status review of the species within ten years, and indicated that Hawaii's green turtle population had steadily increased at a rate of 5.7 percent per year over the last three decades.

The association petitioned NOAA's Fisheries Service and the FWS on Feb. 16, requesting that the agencies identify green turtles in Hawaii as a distinct population segment and subsequently remove them from the list of species protected under the ESA.

NOAA believes the petition presents substantial scientific information, and the requested action may be warranted. However, a positive finding at this initial stage does not prejudice the outcome of the full review.

As part of the status review—a comprehensive assessment of a species' biological status and its threats, and the basis for determining whether a species warrants protection under the ESA—NOAA and FWS will thoroughly review the best scientific and commercial information available on green turtles throughout their range worldwide, including information and comments from researchers, non-governmental organizations, industries, other federal, state, and local government agencies, and any interested individuals or parties.

The review will assess new information gathered since green turtles were listed in 1978. This will include taking a fresh look at information the agencies already have, and information submitted during the public comment period, with special emphasis on the agencies' requirements for classifying populations as distinct population segments. Progress in genetic studies, telemetry, and tagging has led to significant advances in understanding the population structure and distribution of these turtles since their listing.

Green turtles—*Chelonia mydas*—are the largest hard-shelled marine turtle species, growing from 2-inch hatchlings to three foot long adults weighing more than 300 pounds. They are found in tropical and subtropical waters around the globe, and nest on the beaches of 80 countries. Every two to four years, nesting females return to the same beaches where they were hatched to lay eggs.

Breeding populations of the green turtle in Florida and along the Pacific Coast of Mexico are currently listed as endangered; all other populations are listed as threatened. Threats to the species include incidental capture in fishing gear; marine debris entanglement or ingestion; harvest of eggs and adults (historically, though the practice continues in some areas of the world); and the tumor growth disease *fibropapillomatosis*.

If any population is listed as a DPS, it is considered as a discrete species under the ESA. For example, if the Hawaiian population were to be listed as a DPS, any decision about that DPS would only affect the green turtles of Hawaii. If any DPS were delisted, it would still be monitored by NOAA, FWS, and other partners to ensure that it continued to thrive. Within 12 months of receiving the petition, NOAA and FWS are required to publish their final determination, and to file a proposed rule in the Federal Register if they decide to make changes to the list. A proposed rule would be subject to at least 60 days of public comment, and public hearings may be held. One year after publishing a proposed rule, NOAA and FWS are required to finalize the rule.

For more information on the listing and delisting process, go to <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/listing>.

You may submit comments, information, or data on green turtles or their critical habitat until October 1, 2012:

Online: Submit all electronic information via the Federal eRulemaking Portal <http://www.regulations.gov>. To submit information via the e-Rulemaking Portal, first click the "submit a comment" icon, then enter "NOAA-NMFS-2012-0154" in the keyword search. Locate the document you wish to provide information on from the resulting list and click on the "Submit a Comment" icon to the right of that line.

By mail: Office of Protected Resources, NMFS
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910.

Please include the Regulation Identifier Number NOAA-NMFS-2012-0154 when submitting comments.

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