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NOAA designates additional critical habitat for leatherback sea turtles off West Coast

NOAA announced today the designation of additional critical habitat to provide protection for endangered leatherback sea turtles along the U.S. West Coast. NOAA is designating 41,914 square miles of marine habitat in the Pacific Ocean off the coasts of California, Oregon and Washington.

This designation will not directly affect recreational fishing, boating and other private activities in critical habitat. Critical habitat designations only affect federal projects that have the potential to adversely modify or destroy critical habitat. Critical habitat designations aid the recovery of endangered and threatened species by protecting habitat that the species rely on.

NOAA and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have already designated critical habitat for leatherback turtles along Sandy Point Beach at the western end of the island of St. Croix, U.S.V.I., and in adjacent Atlantic coastal waters. NOAA is designating this additional critical habitat in the Pacific Ocean as a result of a petition to revise the existing critical habitat for leatherbacks to include important habitat off the U.S. West Coast. Once an Endangered Species Act petition is received, NOAA Fisheries must evaluate the petition and scientific information provided to determine if the petitioned action is warranted. If it is, the agency must make a determination on how to move forward.

The newly designated critical habitat is made up of two sections of marine habitat where leatherbacks are known to travel great distances across the Pacific to feed on jellyfish. The southern portion stretches along the California coast from Point Arena to Point Arguello east of the 3,000-meter depth contour, while the northern portion stretches from Cape Flattery, Wash. to Cape Blanco, Ore., east of the 2,000-meter depth contour.

The leatherback sea turtle, the largest marine turtle in the world, has been listed as endangered since 1970. Leatherbacks have the largest range of any living reptile and occur throughout the oceans of the world. They feed primarily on jellyfish and lay their eggs on tropical and subtropical beaches. Although very little is known about their lifespan, biologists estimate leatherbacks can live for 45 years or more. Leatherbacks face many dangers both in the marine environment and on land, including bycatch in fishing gear, habitat destruction and the harvest of eggs and adults on nesting beaches.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Join us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and our other [social media channels](#).

Figure: Map of final critical habitat designation for leatherback sea turtles in the Pacific Ocean. The map depicts the two sections of designated habitat and the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone or EEZ along the U.S. West Coast.

