Leatherback Turtle

Leatherback turtles are named for their shell, which is leather-like rather than hard, like other turtles.They are the largest sea turtle species and also one of the most migratory, crossing both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Pacific leatherbacks migrate from nesting beaches in the Coral Triangle all the way to the California coast to feed on the abundant jellyfish every summer and fall. Although their distribution is wide, numbers of leatherback turtles have seriously declined during the last century as a result of intense egg collection and fisheries bycatch. Globally, leatherback status according to IUCN is listed as Vulnerable, but many subpopulations (such as in the Pacific and Southwest Atlantic) are Critically Endangered.

New Year Starts Off Right for Sea Turtles

The beginning of 2014 came with a number of positive news stories for sea turtles around the globe. Here's a look at a few.

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Marine turtles are the living representatives of a group of reptiles that has existed on Earth and traveled our seas for the last 100 million years. They are a fundamental link in marine ecosystems. Leatherback turtles consume large numbers of jellyfish which helps to keep populations of these marine organisms in check. Marine turtles, including leatherbacks, also provide a vital source of income as a draw for ecotourism in coastal communities, especially in the Coral Triangle.

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Leatherback turtles come to nest on the French Guiana coasts almost all year, but there are two main seasons, the big one from April to August and the smaller one from November to January. Pacific populations have declined over the last twenty years from overharvesting and interactions with fisheries. Atlantic leatherbacks, with their long migrations across the ocean, put them at great risk of running into longline fisheries. Leatherbacks feed almost exclusively on jellyfish, making them susceptible to mistakenly swallowing plastic bags floating in the ocean, which can kill them.

OVERHARVESTING AND ILLEGAL TRADE

Egg collection on many turtle nesting beaches is a very serious threat, especially in Southeast Asia where a culture of legal egg collection leads to the removal of tens of thousands of eggs. This practice has contributed to the local extinction of leatherbacks in Malaysia. Within the last several decades extensive egg collection and the killing of adult turtles in Indonesia has resulted in huge population declines throughout the region. Despite protective legislation, many eggs produced each year in Central America are still collected for subsistence or commercial use. Hunting and egg collection persists throughout the Indian Ocean as well.

Worldwide, hundreds of thousands of sea turtles a year are accidentally caught in shrimp trawl nets, on longline hooks and in fishing gillnets. Sea turtles need to reach the surface to breathe, and therefore many drown once caught. Known as bycatch, this is a serious threat to leatherback turtles. As fishing activity expands, this threat is more of a problem.

HABITAT LOSS

Sea turtles are dependent on beaches for nesting. Sea level rise, uncontrolled coastal development, vehicle traffic on beaches, and other human activities have directly destroyed or disturbed sea turtle nesting beaches around the world. Turtle feeding grounds such as coral reefs and sea grass beds are also damaged and destroyed by activities onshore, such as sedimentation from clearing of land and nutrient run-off from agriculture.