



Community-based rangers assist U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service researchers in the collection of Pacific leatherback data at the Kamiali nesting beach in Papua New Guinea. The leatherback is harnessed with a satellite transmitter used to track its migratory route.

‘Come Back Leatherback’ Seeks Long-Term Recovery of the Pacific Sea Turtle

Saving the last viable populations of Pacific leatherback turtles is an enormous challenge, and a group of dedicated experts is rising to the challenge.

Convening July 17-20, 2007, in Terengganu, Malaysia, the group worked to accelerate actions underway to ensure that Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders will long continue to live alongside these gentle giants.

Red-listed by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) as critically endangered, the Pacific leatherback faces an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild. Some 95 percent of these giant animals have vanished in the last 20 years due to human activities such as egg poaching, loss of nesting beaches, hunting of adults and accidental captures in fisheries.

The workshop in Terengganu was the second in a series that initially convened in Bellagio,

Italy, in November 2003, and which created *The Bellagio Blueprint* containing steps to conserve all sea turtle species from extinction.

This second workshop brought together 45 experts on sea turtles, fisheries, conservation and finance from 10 countries to apply *The Bellagio Blueprint* to the western Pacific leatherback nesting populations. Both workshops were funded by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, the agency responsible for management of fisheries in the US Pacific islands.

“As Pacific islanders, we originate from an oral culture, and the wisdom of our ancestors is found in our chants, songs, place names, proverbs and poetical sayings,” said Kitty Simonds, the Council’s executive director, giving the workshops opening remarks. “I would like to share two with you today.

“The first is a poetic name for turtle in Hawaiian: *Ka i a au mai me he manu*. The fish that swims with the

movements of a bird. The second is about how fishermen regard birds: *Pohai ka manu maluna, he ia ko lalo*. When the birds circle above, there are fish below.

“The Council is interested in the recovery of the leatherback sea turtle because our largest fishery is for tuna and swordfish, which are caught primarily by our longline fleet,” Simonds explained. “Each year our Hawaii-based longline fishermen are allowed to hook, tangle or otherwise interact with only 16

leatherback turtles. The number of leatherback interactions allowed by the fishery is based on the size of the leatherback population. So it is in our best interest to ensure that the leatherback population is a thriving population.”

The experts meeting in Terengganu drafted a business plan, which will be completed by December 2007. The plan makes the strong case that additional funds and other resources are needed to accelerate existing leatherback conservation actions and sustain them over the long term.

The plan identifies the urgent need to direct funds towards maintaining and building local capacity in the key western Pacific leatherback nesting countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Vietnam, especially by making long-term investments in the communities and to the fishers living and working around nesting beaches.

Two key areas that were discussed in Terengganu were the promotion of increased recruitment of hatchlings from nesting sites and the minimization of interactions with coastal fisheries in waters adjacent to nesting grounds and in the migratory pathways to inter-nesting areas and foraging grounds.

As part of the business plan, and

based on the critical conservation needs in the western Pacific and their estimated costs, the Terengganu workshop also began to develop a Pacific leatherback fund-raising strategy called “Come Back Leatherback.” Preliminary estimates indicate that the costs of saving the leatherback are modest relative to the long-term value of this charismatic and iconic species.

The strategy envisages setting up a dedicated Pacific leatherback conservation fund. The fund will be designed to attract support from governments, foundations, corporations and the public. Grants will be made for focused priority conservation actions.

“This is a critical time for these endangered species,” says Dr. Peter Dutton, leader of the Marine Turtle Research Program at the National Marine Fisheries Service’s SW Science Center. “Although important and valuable steps have been undertaken over the past few years, without guaranteed long-term funding, we face the very real prospect of losing this initial positive momentum. ... Lapses in funds can easily undo years of hard and important work, while funding uncertainty makes it difficult to engage in long-term planning.”

For more information on the Come Back Leatherback campaign and other



Mr. Leatherback (Rod Mast of Conservation International) and Kitty Simonds, executive director of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, on Terengganu beach, Malaysia. Due in part to human over-harvesting of leatherback eggs, this species has virtually disappeared from this site, which was once famed for having one of the region’s largest leatherback nesting populations.

Pacific sea turtle reports, contact the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council at +1 808 522-8220 or email info.wpcouncil@noaa.gov or go to www.wpcouncil.org/protected/.



The participants at the Terengganu workshop to save Pacific leatherback sea turtles included representatives from the Asian Development Bank, Community Investment Forum, Conservation International, Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, Malaysia Department of Fisheries, Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, The Nature Conservancy, The Ocean Foundation, US National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, US National Marine Fisheries Service, University of Malaysia, University of Papua New Guinea, Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, World Fish Center and World Wildlife Fund, among others.

Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council

The Council is the policy-making organization for the management of fisheries in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ, generally 3–200 miles from shore) around the Territory of American Samoa, Territory of Guam, State of Hawaii, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and U.S. Pacific island possessions—an area of nearly 1.5 million square miles. The Council is tasked with maintaining opportunities for domestic fishing while preventing adverse impacts to stocks, habitat, protected species and ecosystem resources.



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