

U.S. groups seek protection for loggerhead turtles

Thu Nov 15, 2007 6:09am GMT

Reuters

By Jim Loney

MIAMI (Reuters) - Loggerhead sea turtles in U.S. Atlantic waters face extinction from commercial fishing and global warming and should be designated an endangered species, two environmental groups said on Thursday.

The ocean conservation group Oceana and the Center for Biological Diversity are petitioning the U.S. government to win better protection for loggerhead habitats and nesting beaches along the U.S. Eastern Seaboard.

The petition to be filed on Thursday with the U.S. Commerce Department and the Department of the Interior serves as a warning that the groups could sue the U.S. government if it fails to act to protect the species.

Loggerhead nest counts in Florida have dropped nearly 50 percent in the last decade, according to Florida's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute.

At the Archie Carr wildlife refuge, one of the key Florida loggerhead nesting areas, nest counts dropped from 15,645 in 2001 to 10,828 in 2006, and appear to be down again this year.

Under U.S. law, an endangered species is "in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range," while a threatened species is "likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future."

Of the six sea turtle species in U.S. waters, the hawksbill, leatherback, Kemp's Ridley and green are listed as endangered and the Olive Ridley and loggerhead are threatened.

A recent five-year study by the National Marine Fisheries Service concluded that the designation "threatened" should be maintained for the loggerhead.

Tens of thousands of loggerheads are killed yearly in the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico by commercial fishermen, who snare turtles incidentally while going after other species, Oceana said.

"With 90 percent of the U.S. nesting occurring in Florida and a 50 percent decline in nesting over the last decade, it's quite possible these populations will become extinct," said Elizabeth Griffin, a marine scientist at Oceana.

The loggerhead, which can live a century or more, is among the largest of the sea turtle species. They can grow to about 3 1/2 feet and weigh up to 400 pounds (181 kg).

Although loggerhead populations are being decimated by commercial fishing, scientists believe global warming is a greater ongoing threat to loggerheads, said Miyoko Sakashita of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Rising sea levels could destroy Florida nesting beaches, and rising temperatures could dramatically tilt the balance of male and female turtles, endangering the species' reproductive abilities.

"Turtles' gender is determined by temperature. In warmer weather there are fewer males born," she said. "The gender could be skewed toward females. With just a few extra degrees of temperature you get almost all females born."

(Editing by Michael Christie and Eric Walsh)