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Tighter turtle protections eyed

More than 90 percent of U.S. loggerheads nest in Florida

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Loggerhead sea turtles of the southeastern United States might soon receive a higher level of protection.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is seeking public comment on whether loggerheads of the western North Atlantic Ocean, including the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea, should be classified as a “distinct population segment.”

In other words, the loggerhead sea turtle, which nests on Southwest Florida beaches May through October, is listed as a threatened species worldwide, but if the western North Atlantic population is designated a distinct population, it could be listed as endangered independent of the world’s other loggerhead populations.

A distinct population segment is a group of a particular species separated from other groups of the same species and is significant to the species as a whole.

“I certainly think they need to be looking at what’s going on with loggerheads: There’s been a significant decline in loggerhead nesting numbers in Florida,” said Anne Meylan, a research administrator for the Florida



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A juvenile Loggerhead turtle gets accustomed to its new home in an aquarium at the the Conservancy of Southwest Florida in Naples. The turtle was held in captivity in the Twin Cities until it got too large for its home and was flown in via Southwest Florida International Airport. It will be released when it reaches 6.69 inches in size.

Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. “What they do when they change the status is look on an individual population basis rather than saying all loggerheads are this or all loggerheads are that and determine whether our loggerheads need different management.”

Four endangered sea turtle species also nest on Florida beaches — leatherback, hawksbill, green and Kemp’s ridley — but the loggerhead is by far the most common sea turtle in Florida.

More than 90 percent of the loggerheads nesting in the United States nest in Florida, and, along

with Oman, Florida is one of the two largest loggerhead nesting areas in the world.

From 1998 to 2007, however, Florida’s loggerhead nesting numbers have declined almost 50 percent.

“There are factors for the decline in the water and on the beach,” said Tony Tucker, manager of Mote Marine Laboratory’s Sea Turtle Conservation and Research Program. “In the water, longline fisheries can be taking juvenile loggerheads in the eastern Atlantic and western Mediterranean — yes, our Florida loggerheads sometimes

go to the western Mediterranean before they return to Florida to breed.”

Other man-made threats from the water are boat strikes, recreational fishing and plastic bags, which sea turtles mistake for jellyfish, a favorite prey of sea turtles.

On the beach, the main threat to sea turtles is armoring (building seawalls and jetties) which causes erosion, so turtles have fewer places to nest.

“Coastal armoring could be a huge issue for sea turtles in the future,” Schroeder said. “If we don’t solve the problems of managing beaches for sea turtle nests, it doesn’t matter what we do elsewhere.”

NOAA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is looking into the status of the loggerhead as result of a joint petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and the international ocean advocacy group Oceana.

“Loggerheads are listed as threatened globally, but the problem is they have incredible nest fidelity: If they hatch in Florida, they’ll return to Florida,” said Brendan Cummings, a spokesman for the Center of Biological Diversity. “So

if you lose the turtles of Florida, you lose a whole population.”

If the loggerheads of the western North Atlantic are classified a distinct population segment and then re-listed as endangered, wildlife agencies would need to designate critical habitat for them — critical habitat is an area within a species’ range essential to its survival and that might require special management.

“Currently, there is no critical habitat for loggerheads in Florida,” Cummings said.

“Designating critical habitat would provide an extra layer of protection.”

Critical loggerhead habitat would help more than sea turtles in times of climate change, Cummings said.

“With global warming, even under the most optimistic scenarios, most beaches will disappear in Florida,” he said. “If we want sea turtles through the end of the century, we have to plan now to protect higher elevations so they’ll have someplace to nest. If we start planning for sea turtles now, we’re protecting not only for sea turtles but for all Florida.”

Loggerhead turtles

Caretta caretta



Status	Threatened
Habitat	The loggerhead is the most common sea turtle in Florida.
Diet	It's powerful jaws crush mollusks, crabs and encrusting animals attached to reefs and rocks.
Nesting	About 14,000 females nest in the southeastern United States every year. Females lay about 100 eggs.
Size	Adults weigh 200-350 pounds and measure 3 feet in length. Hatchlings are 2 inches long.

SOURCE: WISEGEEK.COM; SAVANNAH RIVER ECOLOGY LABORATORY; TURTLE TIME INC.

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