

A Struggle for the Sea Turtles

We've worked for years to protect them, so why are they still endangered?



Swim away! A loggerhead turtle with a missing flipper

Brian Skerry / National Geographic-Getty Images

By Jerry Adler | Newsweek Web Exclusive

They are among the most beloved and pampered of wild reptiles, transcending ugliness by sheer indomitability. For hundreds of millions of years turtles have struggled out of the sea to lay their eggs on sandy beaches, long before there were nature documentaries to celebrate them, or GPS satellites and marine biologists to track them, or volunteers to hand-carry the hatchlings down to the water's edge lest they become disoriented by headlights and waddle in the direction of a motel parking lot instead. A formidable, if metaphorical, wall of bureaucracy has been erected to protect their prime nesting sites on the Atlantic coastlines of Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas. With all that attention lavished on them, you'd think the darn creatures would at least have the gratitude not to go extinct.

But Nature is indifferent to human notions of fairness, and a report this year by the Fish and Wildlife Service showed a worrisome drop in the populations of several of the six species of North Atlantic sea turtles, notably

loggerheads, which can grow to as much as 400 pounds. The South Florida nesting population, the largest, has declined by 50 percent in the last decade, according to Elizabeth Griffin, a marine biologist with the environmental group Oceana. The figures prompted Oceana and the Center for Biological Diversity to petition the government to upgrade the level of protection for the North Atlantic loggerheads from "threatened" to "endangered"—meaning they are in danger of disappearing without additional help. While action on that request was pending, the government announced on Nov. 19 that it was considering an endangered listing for Pacific loggerheads, which nest primarily on the shores of California and Hawaii.

Which raises the obvious question: what else do these turtles want from us, anyway? It turns out, according to Griffin, that while we have done a pretty good job of protecting the turtles for the weeks they spend on land (as egg-laying females, as eggs and as hatchlings), we have neglected the years they spend in the ocean. "The threat is from commercial fishing," says Griffin.

Trawlers (which drag large nets through the water and along the ocean floor) and longline fishers (which can deploy thousands of baited hooks on lines that can stretch for miles) take a heavy toll on turtles (as well as other species of “bycatch,” including sharks and even seabirds). Oceana is calling for more stringent bycatch regulations and the establishment and expansion of marine sanctuaries off the Atlantic coast.

Of course, like every other environmental issue today, this is playing out against the backdrop of global warming and human encroachment on natural ecosystems. The narrow swaths of beach on which the turtles lay their eggs are being squeezed on one side by development and on the other by the threat of rising sea levels as the oceans warm. Ultimately we must get a handle on those issues as well, or a creature that outlived the dinosaurs will meet its end at the hands of humans, leaving our descendants to wonder how a creature so ugly could have won so much affection.