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Loggerhead status to be reviewed

By BO PETERSEN
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The loggerhead turtle's candidacy for the endangered species list will be reviewed again, after environmental groups protested a recent decision that kept the reptile listed as a threatened species.

Oceana and the Center for Biodiversity want more research done to see if the turtle should be upgraded to endangered, because annual nest counts have declined in the Southeast and Gulf of Mexico in a range from 2 percent to 22 percent. Nests in South Carolina have seen a 3 percent decline.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration conceded. "The observed decline

in nests over the past two decades represents a loss in the number of hatchlings that will enter the population, grow and become sexually mature adults," said Barbara Schroeder, NOAA Fisheries Service scientist and national sea turtle coordinator, in a release.

Loggerhead females crawl out of the sea each summer to make nests in the dunes. The S.C. Department of Natural Resources reported 1,715 nests in 2007, down from 2,568 in 2006. Nests numbers can vary widely year to year.

An upgrade could mean tighter offshore fishing restrictions at times and places where the turtles are shown to gather. The environmental groups petitioned for the review,

despite research that shows the numbers of young turtles caught in samples is increasing.

It's too early to say whether or how area fishermen might be affected, said Frank Blum, South Carolina Seafood Alliance director. The state's fishermen were among the first to use turtle excluder devices to avoid snaring the turtles.

"We've gone to school. We have the kits onboard to properly take care of them if we do interact with them," he said. "We're so restricted now that anything like (a season closure) would put us out of business."