

Advocates want more protection for loggerhead turtles

By SCOTT HARPER
The Virginian-Pilot

Two environmental groups are expected to ask the federal government today to declare the loggerhead sea turtle an endangered species.

The loggerhead is by far the most common sea turtle seen in Virginia waters, including the Chesapeake Bay, each summer and fall, and is listed as "threatened" by the government.

But the two groups, Oceana and the Center for Conservation Biology, fear that without elevated federal attention and protection, the docile marine reptile may become extinct.

"Clearly, more needs to be done," said Elizabeth Griffin, a marine wildlife scientist with Oceana. She noted that loggerheads have been classified as threatened under the Endangered Species Act since 1978, yet their numbers remain weak throughout the Atlantic Ocean.

The groups are expected to deliver a petition this morning to federal wildlife regulators in Washington.

The action will initiate a 90-day process in which government scientists must determine if the request has merit. If so, a full-blown review would be undertaken, which would take at least a year to complete.

A draft copy of the petition cites a five-year government study published last summer that found all five nesting

populations in the North Atlantic are declining. The study describes how commercial fishing gear - nets, especially - are a major culprit, along with shoreline development, lost habitat, global warming and other factors.

However, the study concludes that "we do not believe the loggerhead should be delisted or reclassified," though it does suggest additional study.

Five types of sea turtle are known to visit the coasts of Virginia and North Carolina, usually between May and November, during their coastal migration. Three are endangered and two are threatened, including the loggerhead.

About 3 feet long and weighing an average of 250 pounds, loggerheads are known for their orange-brownish coloring, powerful jaws and passive demeanors. Juveniles especially are drawn to the Chesapeake Bay, where they feast on crabs, horseshoe crabs and sea snails.

Concerns about their standings on mid-Atlantic beaches prompted the government to impose fishing restrictions in the Bay during summer months - limits that have irked fishermen, who resent being implicated in turtle deaths.

Environmentalists tried unsuccessfully to elevate the loggerheads to endangered-species status in 2003 - but only for one subpopulation, which nests on beaches from North Carolina to Georgia.

This time, according to petitioners, they are seeking such status for all

populations in the western North Atlantic - essentially, the entire East Coast.

Griffin said a new classification would require the government to establish guidelines for designating and protecting "critical habitat." In this case, that would mean nesting beaches from Virginia to Florida.

Several biologists and state experts were not sure what the new status would accomplish, given that fishing restrictions and nesting protections already exist for loggerheads and other sea turtles.

"It's not a bad thing to at least ask if there's a justification for it," said Mark Swingle, director of research and conservation at the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center in Virginia Beach.

Kate Mansfield, who wrote her doctoral thesis last year about sea turtles in state waters while studying at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, reached a different conclusion than the petitioners.

In her paper, Mansfield wrote that pound-net fishing "no longer is a significant source of sea turtle mortality in Virginia." She concluded that increased standings and beach deaths might best be attributed to "a larger turtle population or changes in mortality over time."