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California's Leatherback Sea Turtle Could Face Extinction In The Next 20 Years



By Hannah Bricker

Less than six months after the Pacific leatherback sea turtle was named California's official marine reptile, studies suggest it might be time to launch a search for a new species to fill the role.

A recent report from the Ecological Society of America shows the population of leatherback sea turtles in west coast waters could become extinct over the next 20 years. The species has been considered endangered since 1970.

Leatherback turtles have been on the decline since 1980, according to a press release from the Center for Biological Diversity. The population of nesting sea turtles has dropped by 5.9 percent per year since 1984. The number of nests dropped from 14,455 in 1984 to 1,532 in 2011.

"This study is a grim warning that we're not doing enough to save leatherback sea turtles or their ocean home. The problems they face--climate change, plastic pollution, fisheries that catch far more than fish--are problems that threaten us, too," Catherine Kilduff of the Center for Biological Diversity said in the release.

The research was conducted by a group of scientists from State University of Papua, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service and the World Wildlife Fund Indonesia.

In addition to those causes, others credit predation of eggs, beach erosion, increased sand temperature with the decline.

The use of drift gill nets is also sparking controversy in the preservation of the leatherback sea turtles. The nets, which can be over one mile long, float in the ocean and often entangle species. Though sea turtles were not found entangled in the nets in 2010, a portion of their food supply made up 98 percent of the gillnet bycatch, according to an article by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Next month, the National Marine Fisheries Services will meet to discuss the use of drift gill nets in an area inhabited by the leatherback sea turtles.

"This new study confirms that we should be doing everything possible to protect leatherback sea turtles

both in our waters and abroad,” senior scientist Ben Enticknap said in the release.

In 2007, Oceana petitioned the government to create a protected, critical habitat for leatherback sea turtles off the west coast. The NMFS provided nearly 42,000 square miles of ocean habitat in 2012.

Leatherback sea turtles are the largest breed of sea turtles on earth, weighing between 550 and 2,000 pounds.