



Environmentalists, federal agencies, at loggerheads over sea turtles

By Deborah Sullivan Brennan

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Three environmental groups sued the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Tuesday for failing to protect critical habitat for loggerhead sea turtles, an endangered species found off the coast of San Diego and elsewhere in California.

The marine conservation organization Oceana, along with the Center for Biological Diversity and Turtle Island Restoration Network, said the federal agencies should have assigned critical habitat for the animals by September 2012, a year after they revised the turtles' status from threatened to the more severe listing of endangered.

The animals sometimes die in drift gillnets, and face habitat loss from sea level rise, light pollution, trash, coastal development, beach armoring and renourishment, and vehicles driving on beaches, the lawsuit stated.

Critical habitat confers an extra level of protection for the animals on federal lands they inhabit, or on projects that require federal permits.

“The Services’ failure to designate critical habitat significantly diminishes loggerhead sea turtles’ chances for long-term recovery and survival,” said the lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco.

Jane Hendrin, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Carlsbad office, said she had not seen a copy of the complaint and could not comment on it.

The wide-ranging turtles nest in Japan, swim past Hawaii and feed in areas off Baja and Southern California, said Ben Enticknap, Pacific project manager for Oceana, who said San Diego forms a feeding “hot spot” for the animals.

“So we’re particularly going to be looking at that area off Southern California, hoping National Marine Fisheries will designate it critical habitat,” he said.