

# San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

## Leatherback turtle sanctuary set up on West Coast

Peter Fimrite,  
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Federal regulators designated nearly 42,000 square miles of ocean along the West Coast as critical habitat for the Pacific leatherback turtle Friday, far less than originally proposed but still the largest protected area ever established in American waters.

The protected area is the first permanent safe haven in the waters of the continental United States for endangered leatherbacks, which swim 6,000 miles every year to eat jellyfish outside the Golden Gate.

The designation, by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, was a bittersweet victory for environmentalists, who have been fighting to protect the marine reptiles from extinction.

The 41,914 square miles that the NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service protected along the coasts of California, Oregon and Washington did not include the migration routes the turtles take to get to the feeding grounds. That means 28,686 square miles of habitat originally proposed for the designation was left unprotected.

"It's a big step in the right direction, but we want protections for migratory pathways," said Ben Enticknap, the Pacific



David Wimpfheimer / seaturtles.org

The Pacific leatherback sea turtle population has declined 95 percent since the 1980s.

project manager for Oceana, an international nonprofit dedicated to protecting the world's oceans. "I guess we've got a lot more work to do to get there."

### How protection works

The regulations will restrict projects that harm the turtles or the gelatinous delicacies they devour. The government will be required to review and, if necessary, regulate agricultural waste, pollution, oil spills, power plants, oil drilling, storm-water runoff and liquid natural gas projects along the California coast between Santa Barbara and

Mendocino counties and off the Oregon and Washington coasts.

Aquaculture, tidal, wave turbine, desalination projects and nuclear power plants will have to consider impacts on jellyfish and sea turtles. For instance, the repermitting of the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant, in San Luis Obispo, will probably come under scrutiny.

The regulations are a response to a lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco in 2009 by the nonprofit environmental groups Turtle Island Restoration Network, the Center for Biological Diversity and Oceana. The groups had been

trying since 2007 to establish critical habitat for leatherbacks under the Endangered Species Act. They accused the government of failing to protect the reptiles from gill-net and longline fishing, oil drilling and a variety of other activities, including wave-energy projects.

### **California habitat**

The new ruling covers 16,910 square miles along California's coast from Point Arena (Mendocino County) to Point Arguello (Santa Barbara County) to a depth of 9,000 feet. The remaining turtle habitat stretches from Cape Flattery, Wash., to Cape Blanco, Ore. seaward to a depth of a little more than 6,500 feet.

The only other critical habitat established for leatherbacks in U.S. waters is in a small area along the western end of St. Croix, in the Virgin Islands. There is also some critical habitat in Puerto Rico for green sea turtles and hawksbill sea turtles, but nothing as large as the new designation.

Turtle advocates are worried that the decision to leave out migratory routes will leave the giant sea creatures vulnerable to long lines and drift nets dragged by oceangoing vessels, which often mistakenly hook and entangle marine mammals and turtles.

Both longline and gill-net fishing are banned along the West Coast during leatherback migration, but Teri Shore, the program

director for the Turtle Island Restoration Network, said the fisheries service is considering plans to expand gill-net fishing for swordfish.

### **More threats**

"Threats to these turtles are increasing, not diminishing," said Shore, whose organization also goes by its Web name, SeaTurtles.org. "We don't want to see the leatherback turtles go the way of the grizzly bear and disappear."

Leatherbacks, known scientifically as *Dermochelys coriacea*, are the largest sea turtles in the world, sometimes measuring 9 feet long and weighing as much as three refrigerators, or more than 1,200 pounds. Their life span is not fully known, but biologists believe they live at least 40 years and possibly as long as 100 years.

The worldwide population has declined by 95 percent since the 1980s because of commercial fishing, egg poaching, destruction of nesting habitat, degradation of foraging habitat and changing ocean conditions. Listed as endangered since 1970 under the Endangered Species Act, there are believed to be only 2,000 to 5,700 nesting females left in the world.

Pacific leatherbacks leave their nesting grounds in Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea and swim across the Pacific Ocean to forage along the West Coast in the summer and fall. It is the

longest known migration of any marine reptile.

### **Golden Gate jellyfish**

They are often seen feeding on jellyfish in the shipping lanes outside the Golden Gate, in Monterey Bay and Bodega Bay. Assemblyman Paul Fong, D-Cupertino, said Friday that he will introduce legislation designating the leatherback as California's official marine reptile in an attempt to call attention to its plight.

The newly protected zones will extend 200 miles out to sea, but they won't protect the slow-moving creatures from floating plastic bags, which look like jellyfish. A recent study found plastic in the intestinal tracts of 37 percent of 370 leatherbacks that had been found dead.