



ENDANGERED SPECIES: NOAA establishes leatherback turtle protection area

Monday, January 23, 2012

- Peter Fimrite

Federal regulators last week set aside nearly 42,000 square miles of West Coast ocean as critical habitat for the Pacific leatherback turtle.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's designation -- far smaller than originally planned but still the largest-ever protected habitat in American waters -- is the first permanent sanctuary for the endangered turtles, which gather annually to eat jellyfish near San Francisco. The protection covers the turtles and their jellyfish prey, requiring thorough reviews of any proposed development in the designated area.

Environmentalists celebrated the decision from NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service but bemoaned its exclusion of 28,686 square miles of turtle feeding migration routes.

"It's a big step in the right direction, but we want protections for migratory pathways," said Ben Enticknap, the Pacific project manager for Oceana. "I guess we've got a lot more work to do to get there."

Oceana, the Turtle Island Restoration Network and the Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in San Francisco in 2009 to establish the protected area. The groups accused the government of failing to prevent harm to the reptiles from gill-net and longline fishing, oil drilling, wave energy projects and other activities. The new regulations ban gill-net and longline fishing during leatherback migration periods, but the fisheries service is considering an expansion of swordfish gill-net fishing.

"Threats to these turtles are increasing, not diminishing," said Teri Shore, program director for the Turtle Island Restoration Network. "We don't want to see the leatherback turtles go the way of the grizzly bear and disappear."

Worldwide populations of leatherback turtles -- which can grow as long as 9 feet, weigh as much as 1,200 pounds and possibly live as long as 100 years -- have declined by 95 percent since the 1980s due to commercial fishing, egg poaching and habitat destruction. The reptiles have been listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act since 1970