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# The Oregonian

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## Obama Administration boosts protection for Leatherback sea turtle habitat off Oregon, Washington and California coasts

■ Scott Learn,

The Obama Administration today boosted protection for 41,914 square miles of feeding grounds for endangered Pacific leatherback sea turtles off the coast of Oregon, Washington and California.

The “critical habitat” designation by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is smaller than proposed by turtle advocates, but is the largest area set aside to protect sea turtle habitat in the United States.

It’s also the first protected area to focus on the wide-ranging turtle’s foraging grounds. From mid-summer through fall, the turtles migrate 6,000 miles from nesting grounds in Indonesia to feed on jellyfish in the West Coast’s nutrient-rich waters.

View full sizeBen Enticknap, Pacific project manager for Oceana, called the designation “a major step forward.” Oceana, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Turtle Island Restoration Network petitioned NOAA in 2007 to protect the turtle’s West Coast habitat.

Advocates are disappointed that NOAA’s decision, required under a court settlement, does not protect the turtle’s migratory pathways. It also excludes any consideration of fishing impacts, they said, such as mile-long drift nets used to target swordfish off California.

But the habitat listing will increase scrutiny of federally permitted projects that affect the protected areas, Enticknap said, including tidal and wave energy projects and offshore drilling.

It should also boost scrutiny of agricultural pesticide runoff and plastic bag litter, he said -- studies of the turtle’s intestinal tracts shows they mistake the bags and other refuse for jellyfish.



The leatherback, at up to 2,000 pounds the largest marine turtle in the world, has been listed as endangered since 1970. Biologists estimate leatherbacks can live for 45 years or more.

The western Pacific population has declined more than 95 percent since the 1980s, advocates say, with as few as 2,300 adult females remaining.

Many turtles are caught by accident and killed in longline and gillnet fisheries for swordfish, shark and tuna, advocates say. Such fishing is currently largely banned in the California and Oregon waters during the summer and fall when leatherbacks are present.