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Put an end to Louisiana's deadliest catch; save endangered turtles: Jaclyn Lopez

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columnist

At last week's International Sea Turtle Society symposium in New Orleans, sea turtle conservationists discussed the benefits of shrimpers and researchers working side-by-side to improve the escape-hatch devices that allow the turtles to free themselves from nets.

It's no longer a closely held secret of the trade that the vast majority of what's caught in shrimp trawls isn't shrimp but "bycatch," a variable seafood stew of non-target fish, marine mammals and protected sea turtles. So any guidance from shrimpers to ensure the turtle excluder devices work properly is welcomed.

But the biggest challenge in Louisiana is making sure shrimpers are actually using the devices, which research has shown to be more than 90 percent effective at allowing sea turtles to escape nets



Sea turtle escaping a net equipped with turtle excluder device. (NOAA)

without significantly reducing shrimp catch.

Not only are they currently not required on all nets, but in Louisiana there is even a law prohibiting enforcement of their use.

For more than two decades Louisiana has been the only state with a law prohibiting its officers from enforcing federal regulations requiring the use of the turtle excluder devices. In 2010, the state

Legislature passed a measure to repeal the law only to see it vetoed by Gov. Bobby Jindal.

The good news is that a similar proposal -- House Bill 416 -- is now working its way through the state Legislature to end this damaging policy. Hopefully Gov. Jindal will do the right thing this time around and not stand in the way of this important step to keep the Gulf's five threatened and endangered species -- green, loggerhead, Kemp's

ridley, hawksbill and leather-back sea turtles from drowning in shrimp nets.

Another major impact on sea turtles comes from the fact that shrimp fishers in shallow coastal waters are not required to use turtle excluder devices. Instead, shrimpers in shallow coastal waters are supposed to observe tow-time restrictions that require them to pull their nets out of the water periodically to check for sea turtles. Unfortunately only 35 percent of the fleet complies with the tow-time requirement, meaning that sea turtles continue to needlessly drown in shrimp nets.

The need for reform in the shrimp fishery is urgent. Scientists estimate the entire Southeast shrimp fishery is killing more than 53,000 sea turtles each year, making the shrimp trawl fishery the leading source of human-induced mortality for sea turtles.

Even by conservative estimates, for every pound of shrimp they haul in, shrimpers capture three pounds of by-catch, which is routinely killed and discarded.

That means every time a family sits down to a feast of 4 pounds of fresh shrimp, at least 12 additional pounds of fish, marine mammals and sea turtles were sacrificed to make the meal possible.

Earlier this month, the Louisiana Shrimp Task Force Committee, made up of shrimp fishers and processors, voted in favor of enforcing the use of turtle excluder devices. With the biggest shrimp harvest and most vessels of any state, Louisiana has an unparalleled opportunity to protect the Gulf's struggling sea turtle populations simply by enforcing the use of turtle excluder devices.

It's right thing to do. And responsible fishermen recognize that the cost of failing to do it is way too high.