

Miami Beach Times

Local news for Miami Beach, Florida and the World

Citizen Law Suit Filed to Save Green Sea Turtle Nests from Sea Level Rise

By Theresa Pinto
August 19, 2019

While Florida's sea turtle populations are currently improving, several still remain endangered around the world.

MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA – The Center for Biological Diversity, the Sea Turtle Oversight Protection and the Turtle Island Restoration Network together filed a notice of their intent to sue the federal agencies responsible for protecting Green Sea Turtle habitat, which faces threats from sea level rise, plastic pollution and warming.

Green Sea Turtles are a global species found in tropical and subtropical oceans. And while Florida's sea turtle populations are currently improving, several still remain endangered around the world.

On August 13th, the three conservation groups announced their intention to sue the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service for failing to protect green sea turtle habitats, after determining in 2016 that they still required protection from sea level rise threats to low-lying nesting sites.



Green sea turtles are recovering, but still face threats from sea level rise, plastic pollution, and warming oceans, photo courtesy of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said that, "Protecting sea turtle habitat will keep them crossing oceans and loyally coming ashore to dig nests on our beaches." The recovery of green sea turtles over the past several decades has been heralded as an iconic success story for the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

A meta-analysis of endangered species by the Center this year showed that most endangered marine species listed under ESA were recovering, especially those listed with critical habitat protections.

However, the current administration recently weakened ESA by, amongst others, implementing new rules on listing species under the Act and limiting the designation of critical habitat to only those areas occupied by the species and not the habitat necessary for growing populations under recovery.

In addition to sea level rise, Green Sea Turtles have been facing multiple threats over the past few years, from the deadly spread of herpes tumors to coastal beach erosion to warming seas altering their sex determination, even including the recent Sargassum crisis. And in May, the UN reported that over a million species in general are in danger of extinction.

A study in 2010 linked the sea turtle herpes disease to polluted waters, namely nitrogen-laden algae and seaweed. In 2016, 24 percent of stranded sea turtles had the disease, called fibropapillomatosis. According to the study, all sea turtles have a dormant herpes virus that begins replicating when the turtles feed on the algae or seaweed.

Scientists also believe that within the end of this century, Green Sea Turtles may all be female. Green Sea Turtles determine their sex with surrounding temperature cues while developing in the egg. Already, some populations have heavily skewed sex ratios due to increasing ocean temperatures, with very few males being born.

However it is sea level rise that is physically washing away their nesting sites via beach erosion. Now with the new rules on designating critical habitat under ESA, the lawsuit may face an uphill battle.

Yet the Center has nearly thirty years of experience using “biological data, legal expertise, and the citizen petition provision of the powerful Endangered Species Act to obtain sweeping, legally binding new protections for animals, plants, and their habitat.”

The Center for Biological Diversity is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places. They claim a national membership of more than 1.4 million members and online activists.

Turtle Island Restoration Network is a global nonprofit dedicated to mobilizing people in order to protect marine biodiversity and the world's oceans.

Sea Turtle Oversight Protection, a non-profit sea turtle conservation organization, is based in Broward County, Florida and survey and monitor sea turtle nests in order to rescue and release ‘disoriented’ hatchlings.