

# Marine Turtle Conservation Fund

Supporting Projects and Initiatives that Protect Sea Turtles Worldwide



*A green sea turtle atop a bed of seagrass.* Credit: Baillieux Daniel / CC license

Marine turtles are truly the ancient mariners of the world's oceans with ancestors dating back more than 100 million years. Seven species of marine turtles currently navigate the oceans.

The Marine Turtle Conservation Fund helps organizations and countries protect and grow their sea turtle populations through a variety of projects, including educational initiatives for communities, patrols of critical nesting beaches, and scientific research that benefits conservation.

Six of the seven marine turtle species are listed in threatened categories by the World Conservation Union: green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), the leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), the loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), the hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), the Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*) and the olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). Only the flatback turtle (*Natator depressus*), which occurs in the near shore and inshore waters of Australia, is listed as data deficient. All marine turtle species except the flatback are also listed as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Once abundant, marine turtle populations now are at a fraction of their levels prior to human over-exploitation. All marine turtle species require many years to reach sexual maturity (10- 40 years depending on the species), have complex life cycles, depend on oceanic beaches for nesting, require specific marine foraging habitats, and are vulnerable to poaching, incidental capture by fishing activities, as well as degradation of their habitats.

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## Program Highlights

- Since 2012, **Education for Nature – Vietnam**, with Marine Turtle Conservation Fund support, has been investigating illegal sea turtle trade routes, identifying the major kingpins, and working with national and local police to stop this trafficking. In 2014 this resulted in the bust of a major trafficking ring with initially more than 1,000 shells (mostly from hawksbill turtles) confiscated in a warehouse destined for China. Following subsequent law enforcement activities, the total grew to more than 7,000 marine turtles. It's the single largest seizure of marine turtle shells in world history.
- After a baseline survey indicated sea turtles were threatened on Liberia's coast, a community beach monitoring program was recently established working with **Sea Turtle Watch Liberia**. Olive ridley, leatherbacks, and green sea turtles use the coast for laying their eggs. Thanks to educational efforts and regular patrols, no poaching was detected in 2015 and an increase in numbers of successfully hatched nests was documented.



*An educational sign in Liberia.* Credit: Sea Turtle Watch Liberia



A loggerhead sea turtle is outfitted with a tracking device in Oman.

Credit: Earl Possardt / USFWS

In 2004, the United States Congress passed the Marine Turtle Conservation Act. The legislation was enacted to ensure the long-term survival of these imperiled species, by assisting in the conservation of marine turtles and their nesting habitats in foreign countries. The Act was established in recognition of the global plight of marine turtles and the need for increased conservation efforts on nesting beaches throughout the world.

## On-the-Ground Investments

### USFWS Support to Marine Turtle Conservation Fund, 2013 - 2015

Fiscal Year	Amount Awarded	Amount Leveraged	Projects	Number of Countries
2015	\$ 1,750,228	\$ 2,672,066	41	29
2014	\$ 1,657,007	\$ 2,697,413	47	29
2013	\$ 1,746,987	\$ 2,259,756	45	26
<i>3-year total</i>	<i>\$ 5,154,222</i>	<i>\$ 7,629,235</i>	<i>133</i>	<i>38*</i>

\* Many countries have projects in multiple years.

## Threats

Major threats to marine turtles on nesting beaches include legal or illegal poaching of eggs or meat, depredation of eggs by natural predators as well as dogs and feral hogs, light pollution from developments which disorients hatchlings and nesting females, and coastal riprap, sea walls, revetments, sand bags, or other hard structures.

Marine turtles are also subject to man-made disasters involving the world's oceans and beaches such as oil spills. Major threats in the marine environment include legal directed fisheries for marine turtles in some countries, accidental capture in artesian gill nets, commercial trawl nets, and long line fisheries.

While long-term conservation efforts are showing success for some species or populations such as the Kemp's ridley, other nesting populations such as those for East Pacific leatherbacks have crashed and face imminent extinction.

## Achievements

Since 2009, funds from the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund have supported a loggerhead sea turtle conservation project in Cape Verde, the third largest loggerhead nesting population in the world. The project includes night time beach patrols in collaboration with the military, international volunteers, and Cape Verdians, as well as beach cleanups, and education and outreach programs with local communities and youth. Prior to initiation of these projects, 25-40% of loggerhead females were taken on the nesting beaches each year and that rate is now reduced to less than 5%. This project also supports an annual meeting for the Cape Verde Sea Turtle Partnership which facilitates greater cooperation among the non-governmental organizations and Cape Verdian national and local government authorities.

Another project supports the East Pacific Hawksbill Initiative and other efforts to protect nests and females for the last known remaining nesting populations of the Eastern Pacific hawksbill in, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Colombia, and Panama. In addition to beach patrols, the project supports the development of ecotourism, as well as local outreach and education efforts, including an annual Hawksbill Festival in Nicaragua and "Day of the Hawksbill" activities in local schools.



Volunteer community monitors practice measuring a sea turtle in El Salvador.

Credit: The Ocean Foundation

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