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Editorial

SPREP's declaration of 2006 as the Year of the Sea Turtle (p. 8) is a welcome and timely reminder of the precarious state of these gentle reptiles. That virtually all of the sea turtles of the Pacific are endangered (p.10) is cause for concern, especially since two major contributors to this situation are over-harvesting of turtle eggs and turtle bycatch from commercial fisheries. This is troubling enough, but researchers have now found that a range of lower species within marine food chains are being targeted by commercial fishers even before top fish are depleted (p.14). This may place entire ecosystems at risk.

All of this emphasises the need to conserve and manage our marine resources rationally and sustainably. Tuna is a major economic resource for many Pacific Island countries and the region's grounds remain the most productive in the world. Keeping this so is now the responsibility of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (p.3) and central to their work will be ensuring compliance with fisheries regulations. Monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) activities will thus be central to the Commission's success (pp.5-7). Generous aid to advisory organisations like the Forum Fisheries Agency (p.12) demonstrates that donor nations are willing to support this effort.

Also new in 2006 is USP's unique Faculty of Islands and Oceans, created to unite all of the academic units related to the natural environments of the Pacific (p.11). This recognizes the close association islanders have with the land and sea and will promote innovative teaching and research to deal with environmental issues. PIMRIS' role in all of this is to improve access to information on the marine environment and the utilization of its resources. A progress report on this mission will be presented to regional leaders at the Heads of Fisheries Meeting in April. Merci,

Chris Nelson, PIMRIS Coordinator

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Will his children's children enjoy sea turtles in the future?



(Photo credit: NOAA Magazine no.170)

2006 Pacific Year of the Sea Turtle Launched

The 2006 Pacific Year of the Sea Turtle (YOST) was launched in Apia, on March 1st, with a renewed call to save this marine icon from extinction.

Facilitated by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), the second 'Year of the Sea Turtle' campaign aims to boost turtle numbers by promoting community conservation of turtle nesting sites, strengthening national legislation and policies to encourage effective management, and fostering partnerships for long-term conservation.

The original YOST campaign, held in 1995, was a general public awareness and educational initiative. The current campaign builds on this foundation with targeted actions for targeted groups that impact on turtle populations. Despite an increase in turtle conservation initiatives in the region, and the world, a renewed effort was seen as necessary given that the sea turtle continues to have a threatened status.



The target audiences for the 2006 campaign are :

- Communities* : since nesting areas, turtle foraging and feeding areas are usually on traditionally owned lands or in areas near or easily accessible by communities, and the fact that some communities continue to harvest turtles for traditional feasts, this group therefore plays an important role in the effort to conserve turtles
- Commercial fishers* : this includes purse-seining, long-lining, and trawling operations. Turtle mortalities from by-catches, boat strikes and pollution from commercial fishing operations are significant but can be reduced or even eliminated
- Legislators and policy makers* : an integral part of the effort for sustainable management of the utilization of turtles is having effective, relevant and practical national legislation and policies
- Partners* : because of the migratory nature of sea turtles, turtle conservation requires the regional effort of a range of states/territories. For long term and effective effort, partnership amongst agencies, organizations and donors working on turtle conservation is required.

SPREP's Acting Director, Vitolio Lui, has urged countries and territories to participate in the latest campaign in an effort to reverse the rapid decline in numbers. "As a shared resource, turtle conservation is a shared responsibility, and SPREP is promoting the need for communities, governments and industry to work together to increase turtle stocks". SPREP believes the critical success factor in this campaign is the participation of their key partners including national governments, intergovernmental organizations, communities, fisheries and tourism authorities, donors, and NGOs.

YOST will involve a series of public events and activities in SPREP's 25 member countries and territories under the banner "Sea Turtles: Protect them, Protect our heritage". This message reflects the key role that turtles play in Pacific culture, heritage and environment. A key component of this campaign is a satellite tracking programme that will monitor the movements of five turtles throughout the region. By attaching a satellite tag to the shells of the turtles, SPREP, with support from the US National Marine Fisheries Service, will access information about the migration routes of the turtles.

This programme will provide valuable information about the movements of turtles, and will also be used in the campaign's education and awareness activities. School children throughout the Pacific will be encouraged to 'Adopt-a-turtle' and track its movements throughout the year as part of their school studies. Not only will this activity increase awareness and understanding about turtles and the marine environment, it will also promote their migratory nature, and the need for regional collaboration and partnerships.

On Saturday 25 February, to mark the regional launch of the campaign, the first turtle was tagged in Apia, Samoa by a team from SPREP, the Ministry of Natural Resources, Environment and Meteorology, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, and US National Marine Fisheries Service.

Six of the world's seven recognized turtle species are found in the Pacific. Considered the world's largest continuous marine habitat on the planet, the Pacific Ocean supports the world's largest remaining populations of green, hawksbill, and loggerhead turtles. An integral part of Pacific culture and tradition for centuries, the numbers of turtles inhabiting the Pacific have seriously dropped in the past 50 years mainly due to over-harvesting, exploitation and marine pollution. With almost all species of turtles considered threatened with extinction, SPREP believes that the Pacific must undertake renewed efforts to promote turtle conservation in the region.

This campaign complements that of IOSEA in the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia. SPREP's member countries and territories will also be coordinating national launches to mark this campaign. For more information please contact:

Tamara Logan (tamaral@sprep.org)
Phone: (685) 21929 Fax: (685) 20231



Photo credit: WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey

(Sources: SPREP press release, 1 Mar 2006; SPREP circular 05/98 and the WWF South Pacific website, <http://www.wwfpacific.org/fj/>)

Further Internet resources on turtles and turtle conservation programmes can be found at:

Indo-Pacific Sea Turtle Conservation Group	http://www.aims.gov.au/ipstcg/
IOSEA Year of the Sea Turtle 2006	http://www.ioseaturtles.org/yot2006/
Marine Turtles [NOAA]	http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/
Pacific Regional Environment Programme	http://www.sprep.org/ws/
Sea Turtles of the Pacific Tracking Project	http://www.cccturtle.org/sat14.htm
Wan Smolbag's Environmental Drama	http://www.wan-smolbag-theatre.org/environment.html

Fiji Joins Year of the Turtle Campaign

Efforts to protect one of Fiji's most endangered animals, the green sea turtle, have been boosted following a declaration by a concerned environmental group in Suva. World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) Fiji hopes to highlight the importance of the issue through a variety of posters and key messages on their merchandise.

Working with partners such as the Departments of Environment and Fisheries, WWF expects to create awareness of the regulations that offer sea turtles protection within Fiji's waters. Populations of green sea turtles are estimated to have declined globally by around 60% over the last 50 years. Fiji is an important foraging ground for green turtles hence, the urgent need to conserve them. Although Fiji has a 5 year moratorium that bans the commercial harvest and sale of sea turtles, it is still consumed locally, especially during traditional Fijian ceremonies.

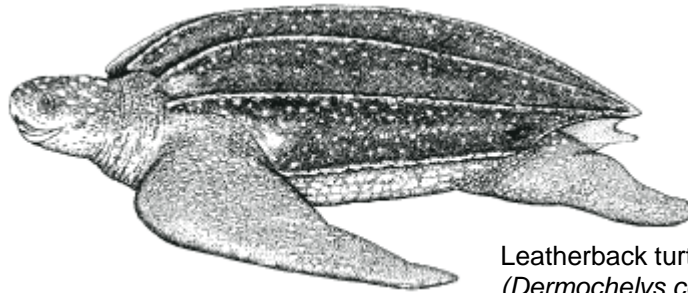
"Turtles are a cultural icon in Fiji. It's a delicacy that is often served at important traditional functions. However, with changing times, turtle meat is now a dish finding its way onto many tables. WWF believes that this is a contributing factor to the severe decline we are seeing in our turtle populations," said Etika Rupeni, WWF Fiji Programme Country Manager.

As part of this effort, WWF Fiji will, over the course of this year, work towards creating awareness on the threats to turtles and on the regulations that offer sea turtles protection within Fiji's waters. They will be working with their partners to agree and undertake actions to protect our ancient mariners.

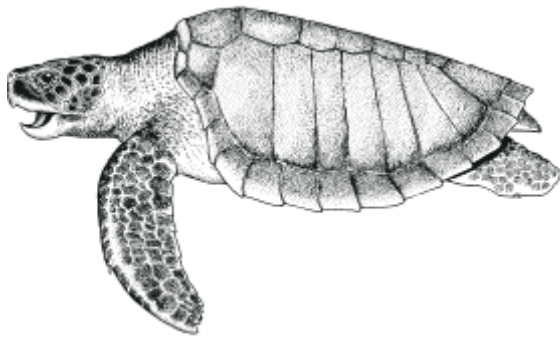
(The Fiji Times, Mar. 4, 2006, p. 18)

Endangered Marine Turtles of the Pacific Islands Region

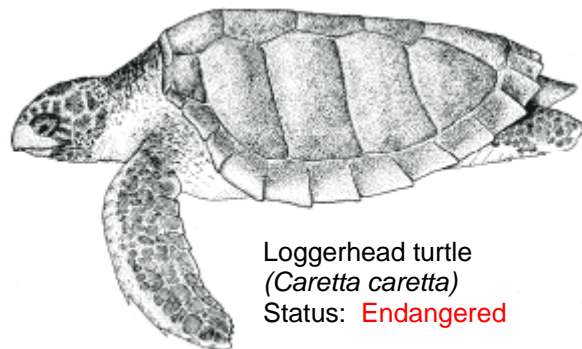
The sea turtles occur in all tropical and warm-temperate oceans. The majority of species inhabit shallow waters along coasts and around islands, but some are highly migratory and are found in the open sea. They are swift swimmers and may attain a speed of about 35 km per hour. Most are predominantly carnivorous, but the green sea turtle becomes vegetarian at the end of the juvenile stage. Nesting occurs on sandy beaches, above the high tide mark, where a clutch of around 100 eggs is buried in the sand and left unattended. Turtles are highly vulnerable to predators, the worst of which is man. All of the species found in Pacific waters are on the IUCN endangered list.



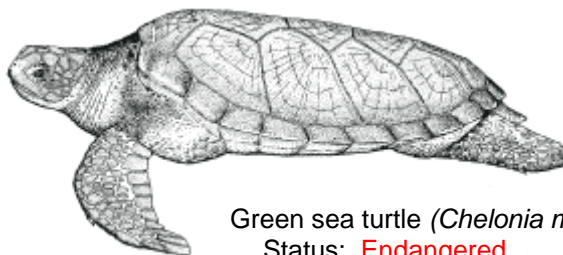
Leatherback turtle
(*Dermochelys coriacea*)
Status: **Critically endangered**



Olive ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*)
Status: **Endangered**



Loggerhead turtle
(*Caretta caretta*)
Status: **Endangered**



Green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)
Status: **Endangered**



Hawksbill sea turtle
(*Eretmochelys imbricata*)
Status: **Critically endangered**

(Source: Carpenter, K.E.; Niem, V.H. (eds.) 2001. *FAO species identification guide for fishery purposes. The living marine resources of the Western Central Pacific. Volume 6.* Rome, FAO. pp.3974-3986.)