

# Critically Endangered Pacific Leatherback

## Sea Turtles Along the U.S. West Coast



One of the most important feeding areas in the entire world for the critically endangered leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is the U.S. coast along the shores of California, Oregon, and Washington. <sup>1</sup> Pacific leatherbacks are among the most imperiled of any sea turtle population in any ocean basin on Earth.

### **Amazing Facts About Leatherbacks**

- Leatherbacks are “living dinosaurs,” having survived 100 million years virtually unchanged.
- Adult leatherbacks can grow to over 8 feet long and weight up to 2,000 lbs.
- When feeding, leatherbacks can dive more than 2,000 feet below the ocean.
- Their journey to the U.S. West coast to feed on jellyfish and back to nesting beaches can be more than 13,000 miles!

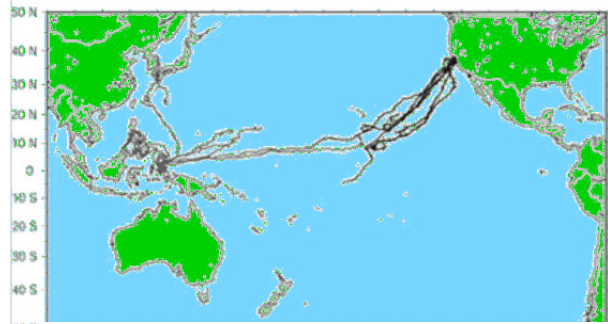
### **Pacific Leatherback Threats**

- Up to 50 percent of the remaining Pacific leatherbacks are caught each year by longline fishermen <sup>2</sup>. Many are killed and even more are injured and then released without care.
- In 2000, pelagic longlines in the Pacific killed an estimated 1,000-3,200 leatherbacks <sup>2</sup>.
- Accidentally eating plastic pollution is common for leatherbacks, and can result in nutritional loss and even death <sup>4</sup>.

Additional threats to leatherbacks come from capture in gillnet fisheries, vessel strikes, poaching, coastal pollution, entanglement in abandoned fishing gear, and nesting beach habitat destruction.

### **Scientific Findings and Predictions**

- Pacific leatherback populations have declined by approximately 90 percent in the last 25 years. <sup>2</sup>
- Unless current fishing practices are changed, Pacific leatherbacks will be extinct in as little as 10-30 years <sup>2</sup>.



Satellite-tracked leatherback movements from nesting beaches in Papua, Indonesia and from foraging areas off the California coast in 2003-2004. <sup>1</sup>



Leatherback sea turtles rely on abundant jellyfish, especially the brown sea nettle, as their primary food source after migrating across the Pacific ocean.

# The Sea Turtle Restoration Project

## Dedicated to Protecting Pacific Leatherbacks



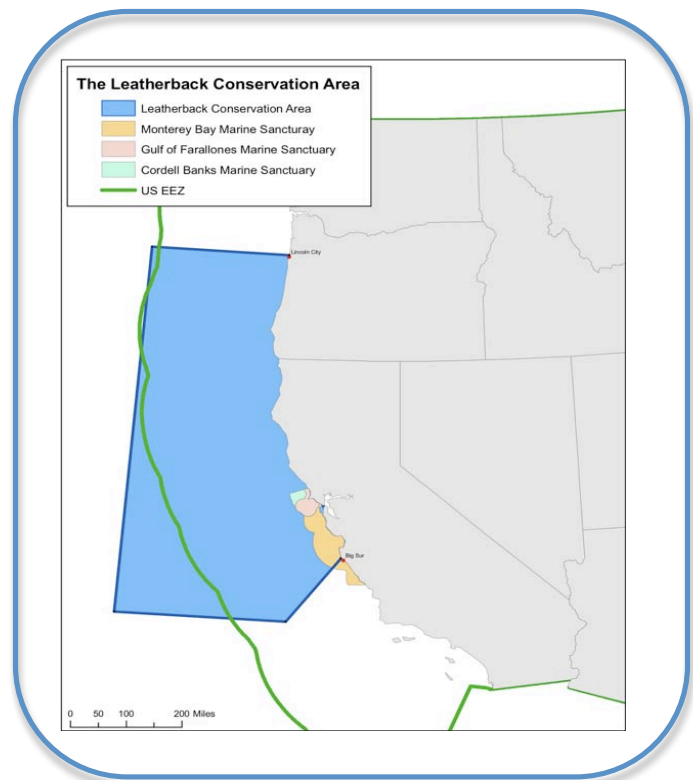
Even small numbers of Pacific leatherbacks caught and killed in fisheries or harmed by coastal pollution have serious consequences for the future survival of Pacific leatherback populations. The death of more than 1 percent of the adult female Pacific leatherback population each year could lead to its extinction <sup>3</sup>.

### Protections Enacted in California's Oceans

- In 1990, the California State Legislature banned all longline fishing in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to prevent the deaths of leatherbacks sea turtles <sup>5</sup>.
- In 2008, the California Legislature passed Assembly Joint Resolution No. 62 (Leno) for west coast sea turtle protection, supporting efforts to preserve and recover Pacific leatherback populations.

### Pacific Ocean Leatherback Protections

- Sea Turtle Restoration Project's (STRP) work resulted in the National Marine Fisheries Service establishing critical habitat for the leatherback within much of the California, Oregon, and Washington EEZ.
- STRP established the Leatherback Conservation Area, a large, closed area for the deadly California drift gillnet fishery to protect leatherbacks during their feeding season.
- STRP successfully closed the Hawaiian longline fishery for its deadly impacts to Pacific leatherback and loggerhead sea turtles in 2006, allowing it to re-open only after more protections were in place.
- Ongoing STRP work has continued to make it illegal for longline vessels to fish in any U.S. EEZ Pacific ocean territory along California, Oregon, and Washington.



**Take Action, Learn More, and Join Us at [www.Seaturtles.org](http://www.Seaturtles.org)!**

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Header photo Doug Perrine/Seapics.com  
References

- (1) Benson SR, *et al.*, 2007. Abundance, distribution, and habitat of leatherback turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) off California, 1990-2003. Fish Bull. 105:337-347.
- (2) Lewison *et al.* 2004. Quantifying the effects of fisheries on threatened species: the impact of pelagic longlines on logger head and leatherback sea turtles. Ecology Letters 226.
- (3) Spotila *et al.* 1996. Worldwide population decline of *Dermochelys coriacea*: are leatherbacks going extinct? Chelonian Conservation Biology 2:209-222.
- (4) Mrosovsky *et al.* (2009). Leatherback turtles: The menace of plastic, Marine Pollution Bulletin 58: 287-289.
- (5) NMFS. Draft Environmental Assessment, 2007. Issuance of Exempted Fishing Permit to Fish with Longline Gear in West Coast EEZ, 2007.