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Re-authorization of the International Marine Turtle Conservation Fund

28 July 2011

My name is Carlos Diez and I am the National Coordinator for the Sea Turtle Program of the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources of Puerto Rico and also a biologist at the Endangered Species Program. In addition, I am a member of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group and National Coordinator of the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network. However, today, I am here on behalf of the government of Puerto Rico and in support of the re-authorization bill for the International Sea Turtle Conservation Fund, submitted by our Resident Commissioner, Pedro Pierluisi and co-authors.

As many of you already know, all species of sea turtles are threatened or endangered due to direct and indirect impacts of human intervention. For example, in Puerto Rico, and in many other places of the Caribbean, sea turtles are hunted for their meat, eggs and carapace. In other areas, sea turtles can be incidental victims of long-line fisheries or are severely affected by oil spills. Other sources of pollution, such as discarded plastics also cause significant sea turtle mortality. Even though these animals can produce many eggs and potentially many hatchlings, they have to contend with natural threats as well, such as predators and the effects of severe weather that can harm the beaches where the eggs are laid. In sea turtles, age of sexual maturity tends to be quite high (at least 16 years), so that's why it takes so long for a population to recover from depressed levels. However, sea turtle populations can recover, and a good example in Puerto Rico's case, at Mona Island, we have the biggest hawksbill turtle nesting rookery in the US jurisdiction and the second largest in the insular Caribbean. When we started counting nests numbers in 1989 our data indicated about 250 nests per season. Last year, we counted 1400 nests. The reason for this success were several factors, 1) an international commercial ban on hawksbill products, especially to Japan, which used to import approximately 5000 hawksbill turtles per year from the Caribbean; 2) control of domestic poaching by federal and state law enforcement; 3) and finally Mona Island's conservation status as natural reserve, where development is prohibited and sea turtle predators such as feral pigs have been controlled.

All these efforts were conducted in great amount thanks to the US Federal government, in particular Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The funding provided by these two agencies allowed us to not only protect these species, but also to understand basic information such as age to sexual maturity, population genetic and migration. The last one is quite important, since it give us the data of where these turtles were going after nesting or from where this turtles came from in our feeding grounds (typically reefs or sea grass beds). It was from saturation tagging, satellite tracking and molecular studies that we learned hawksbill turtles and sea turtles in general are shared resources, or a mixed stock in scientific terms. Our hawksbills turtles regularly migrate to countries such as Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Colombia, and potentially elsewhere in the Caribbean. Green turtles tagged in PR have been found traveling as far as Brazil and leatherbacks cross the Atlantic up to the coast of Wales, or to Canada, by way of New England. Conducting surveys in PR, we've also re-captured animals from other countries such as US Virgin Islands, Bonaire and the Dominican Republic. It is clear that these turtles are internationally shared resources.

Therefore, if we don't protect sea turtles in other geo-political jurisdiction all our efforts at home are in vain. The International Marine Turtle Conservation Fund provides the mechanism to support such projects, such as the effort in the Dominican Republic, which needs funding to protect its beaches from turtle poachers; or in Nicaragua to make fisherman understand that the turtles they catch are not only theirs. By supporting projects like these, sea turtles are hugely benefited in the USA. The USA is a noble country, and most of its citizens enjoy helping these types of initiatives where the benefits to conservation are clear.

The International Marine Turtle Conservation Fund is a method to provide other countries financial assistance in protecting our turtles. However, we (PR) as many states and other territories are in financial difficulties and many of our conservation programs are as well. Therefore, we support the amendment for including up to 20% for the territories to compete for funding in this bill. We have provided an example of a success story with the hawksbill turtles at Mona Island, but in PR, we have two more species, plus more nesting areas for hawksbill turtles that are in jeopardy. In mainland PR, we used to have nesting of hawksbills turtles all over, and now it is limited to very few areas and every year these beaches are being affected by tourist development , or other human related activities and of course poachers. Even though we have received federal funding, it always has been limited, due to our small area. However, we have 3 species of sea turtles and particularly the hawksbill which is one of the most endangered animals on Earth. Last year, even though we were awarded a grant in the Section 6 Program from NMFS, the program didn't have funding assigned by Congress and therefore, the grant could not be awarded. If we try to get funding from other sources, such as European Funds, ect..., we are rejected since many of these programs don't include USA due to our "funding opportunities, such as Section 6". Again, these days, those "other funding sources" have no funds or limited money to support any project. The actual status of the federal government, where NMFS's Section 6 (Protected Species Program) is without funding, it is just an example to make us support any law or effort that could provide funding for US territories to protect sea turtles.

Finally, we, the Dept. of Natural and Environmental Resources of PR reiterate our support for the re-authorization bill with the amendment to include at least 20% of the funds for US territories on behalf of the sea turtles of USA.

Gracias!