U.S. – MEXICO – CANADA AGREEMENT
SEA TURTLE BYCATCH REDUCTION AND PROMOTION OF SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES

Loggerhead foraging areas
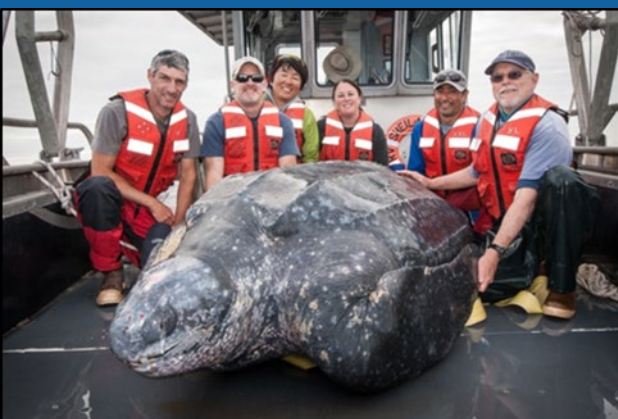
Leatherback nesting range

BACKGROUND

Mexico provides critically important marine and nesting beach habitat for six of the seven species of the world's sea turtles. Two of the most iconic of these species, the North Pacific loggerhead and the East Pacific leatherback turtle, are listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. In recent decades, both species have suffered major population declines in the annual number of nesting females at their respective nesting rookeries. Mortality from fisheries bycatch continues to be the greatest threat to these populations. Reducing bycatch mortality will involve numerous government, academic, and NGO stakeholders in the U.S. and Mexico, as well as communities and fishers that directly interact with turtles. The ultimate goal of this effort is to develop approaches that promote sustainable fishing practices and livelihood opportunities that result in healthier sea turtle populations and marine resources to support coastal communities throughout Pacific Mexico.

MAIN OBJECTIVES

The USMCA Sea Turtle Bycatch Reduction Project is a U.S.-Mexico collaborative effort to recover North Pacific loggerhead sea turtles and East Pacific leatherback sea turtles, and likely other sea turtle species, by reducing sea turtle bycatch in gillnet and longline fisheries through rapid bycatch assessments, information exchanges with fishers and fisheries management entities, development and expansion of alternative livelihoods that decrease unsustainable fishing pressures, and fostering the adoption of innovative bycatch mitigation technologies and turtle-friendly fishing practices by artisanal gillnet and longline fishers in Pacific Mexico. These efforts relate to USMCA Articles 24.18 (Sustainable Fisheries Management) and 24.19 (Conservation of Marine Species), and will promote healthy sea turtle populations and long-lasting, sustainable fisheries practices that do not harm non-target species.

LOOKING FORWARD

NOAA and USTR will continue to work with the Mexican Government and our project partners to promote sustainable fisheries practices and sea turtle conservation in Mexico. This will involve seeking technological fixes to fishing gear and adjustments in fishing methods to reduce fisheries-turtle bycatch interactions and increase sea turtle survival. Coupled with fostering alternative livelihoods that reduce fishing pressure, this project will continue to pursue holistic bycatch solutions that engage fishing communities, scientists, and management entities in efforts to recover loggerhead and leatherback sea turtles in the Pacific.

GOAL 1

Improve understanding of the location and causes of bycatch mortality of loggerheads and leatherbacks through rapid bycatch assessments in coastal communities.

Actions for Years 1-3:

- Develop socially appropriate interview protocols and questionnaires to characterize the nature and frequency of fisheries interactions with loggerhead and leatherback turtles.
- Conduct rapid bycatch assessments in up to 25 coastal fishing communities along the Pacific coast of Mexico.
- Identify areas with the greatest bycatch impacts to loggerheads and leatherbacks.

Goal 1 outcomes so far:

- As of April 2024, a total of 570 rapid bycatch assessments have been conducted across 8 states and 44 communities along the Pacific coast of Mexico. The assessments identify fisheries and gear types that are most problematic for loggerhead and leatherback bycatch, and also reveal opportunities for conservation success.
- The project has a website *www.marescomunidad.com* that describes project efforts and rapid bycatch assessment results via interactive maps and a live 'data dashboard'; the site also describes project efforts to foster alternative livelihoods to reduce fishing pressure.

GOAL 2

Engage with selected communities where bycatch is highest via Fisheries Learning Exchanges to foster dialogue for learning about what bycatch reduction strategies and approaches are most feasible and have most potential to be permanently adopted.

Actions for Years 1-3:

- Visit communities to cultivate trust and exchange ideas among fishers and across communities.
- Work with fishers to development turtle-friendly gears that are practical to implement and have the best chance for local adoption
- Train fishers in best-practice handling techniques to improve survivorship of by-captured turtles.
- Discuss alternative livelihoods to reduce heavy fishing pressure

Goal 2 outcomes so far:

- As of April 2024, 12 Fisheries Learning Exchanges have been conducted, bringing together fishers from high-bycatch areas throughout Pacific Mexico to discuss bycatch reduction and ideas for changing fishing practices and modifying gear.

GOAL 3

Develop, test, and implement bycatch reduction technologies identified during community and fisher engagement.

Actions for Years 1-3:

- Work with fishers to configure fishing gear in ways discussed during Fisheries Learning Exchanges.
- Conduct capacity building to train fishers about implementing gear that is easily adopted and has been shown to reduce turtle bycatch.

Goal 3 outcomes so far:

- Since August 2022, fisheries gear trials [permitted by Mexico's fishery management agency] have been ongoing in three communities of northwest Mexico.
- Gear trials with low profile nets, buoyless nets, and smaller mesh size nets have been applied to study turtle bycatch rate and target species catch rate.
- The gear trials have been completed and data analysis is underway.

GOAL 4

Work further with communities to promote a community–based sea turtle programmatic strategy, describing sustainable fishing practices, such as permanent adoption of bycatch reduction technologies, and alternative livelihoods that reduce unsustainable fishing pressure on sea turtles, and other valuable marine resources.

Actions for Years 1-3:

- Community ambassadors will work with fishers to create local capacity to troubleshoot any issues with the continued use of the bycatch reduction technologies.
- Coordinate with communities to ensure that project findings and recommendations are shared to promote adoption of the most effective sea turtle bycatch reduction measures for each fishery and each community.
- Identify locally relevant incentives to promote the medium to long-term adoption of bycatch reduction practices.
- Assess the success of each locally implemented strategy, as well as the perceptions of community members.

Goal 4 outcomes so far:

- Three communities across three states of northwestern Mexico are now collaborating communities as part of this project's efforts to reduce loggerhead and leatherback bycatch. Actions include use of turtle-friendly fishing gear, use of turtle handling best-practices, and efforts to diversify household income beyond fishing profit.

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