

U.S. panel urges approval for Pacific islanders to harvest sea turtles

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A federal fisheries panel has recommended allowing native peoples in the Pacific, including Hawaiians, to harvest sea turtles as long as the harvesting doesn't endanger turtle populations.

However, since every species of sea turtle found in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific islands is in danger, it's unlikely that prohibitions of killing the animals will be lifted, fisheries scientists said.

The decision by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery

Management Council doesn't change existing regulations prohibiting such taking but serves as a recommendation to the federal agencies that oversee sea turtle populations: the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The council met in Honolulu recently. Among the measures it approved was a recommendation from its Native and Indigenous Rights Advisory Panel that "indigenous people of the U.S. Pacific islands be allowed to harvest sea turtles for home consumption and cultural noncommercial

purposes, provided that this harvest is consistent with the long-term conservation and protection of the resource."

National Marine Fisheries Service turtle researcher George Balazs said the green sea turtle is the most sought-after animal by most native cultures, and in the central Pacific, is the most numerous. However, it remains severely depleted in most areas.

Balazs said American Samoa, the Northern Marianas and Guam combined probably have no more than 50 nesting green sea turtles. Hawaii's population of nesting turtles has tripled

since state and federal bans on killing the animals were placed in effect during the 1970s, but remains on both the state and federal endangered species lists as a threatened species.

Green sea turtles globally are suffering from a mysterious disease that causes large, pale tumors to grow. The tumors often impede their ability to swim, blind them and sometimes block their mouths, restricting their breathing and eating.

Scientists still haven't figured out what causes the tumors, called fibropapillomas, and Balazs said that even if the

number of sea turtles was high enough, he wouldn't recommend letting people eat the diseased animals. It's possible even turtles without obvious tumors could be infected by the disease that causes them, he said.

Other turtles that are rarer in Hawaiian waters are the hawksbill and leatherback, both of which are endangered. The olive ridley turtle, which occasionally is seen here, is endangered or threatened, depending on its condition in the specific turtle's home waters.