

National Marine Fisheries Service joins in marine turtle workshop

In line with NOAA's commitment to develop and implement protective programs to help endangered and threatened marine turtles, the National Marine Fisheries Service joined recently with the South Pacific Commission (SPC) to sponsor a marine turtle workshop which was held in Noumea, New Caledonia from Dec. 11-14, 1979, said Richard S. Shomura, director of the Honolulu Laboratory, Southwest Fisheries Center, who shared responsibility with Dr. Rene Grandperrin of the SPC for convening the workshop.

The workshop was attended by representatives from 11 SPC member countries including American Samoa, Fiji Islands, French Polynesia, Guam, Republic of Kiribati, New Caledonia, New Hebrides, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Kingdom of Tonga, and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Also present and contributing much to the success of the workshop were consultants Dr. Archie Carr of the University of Florida, Dr. Peter Pritchard of the Florida Audubon Society, and George Balazs of the University of Hawaii.

Observers from Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippine Islands were also in attendance. Scientific research organizations represented at the workshop were the Association Pour la Sauvegarde de la Nature Neo-Caledonienne, Centre National Pour L'Exploitation des Oceans (CNEOX), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer (ORSTOM).

The workshop discussed the socio-economic importance of marine turtles among islanders in the South Pacific countries, the impact that increased fishing pressure brought about by a strong demand for turtle meat and turtle by-products has had on turtle resources in the region, and also reviewed the turtle farming and headstarting programs currently underway in some of the countries.

The workshop recognized that of the six species of marine turtles occurring throughout the region, the green and hawksbill are by far the most important. The other species such as the leatherback, loggerhead, Pacific ridley, and flatback occur only rarely.

One of the most important results of the workshop, said Shomura, was the recognition by the member countries that the turtle resource in parts of the tropical Pacific was dwindling and that conservation of the turtle resources is a highly complex and sensitive international problem that can be solved only by the sustained efforts of all the countries within the region.

Shomura also pointed out that knowledge of the life history of all the marine turtles is fragmentary and that the workshop identified those areas where research is needed. Among the interesting items brought out at the workshop was a long-term recovery of a tagged hawksbill that remained at liberty for 28 months and traveled about 1,600 km from her nesting area on Santa Isabel Island in the Solomon Islands to Audubon Island off Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea. Shomura added that hawksbills generally do not make extensive migrations but this one was an exception.

One of the biggest problems in the region is the difficulty that fisheries officers face in attempting to enforce turtle conservation regulations. Many of the islands within a sovereignty are widely scattered and there is no way of finding out the extent of poaching in those areas. Furthermore, many of the existing laws are weak and unenforceable, said Shomura.

To resolve some of the problems identified by the workshop, the following seven recommendations for future action were considered and made a part of the workshop's report:

- Dissemination of turtle information through the SPC Newsletter,
- a thorough scientific evaluation of the effectiveness of ongoing headstarting programs,
- development of basic educational material on turtles for use in the region,
- management oriented research on the biology of the hawksbill in the region,
- establishment of turtle-breeding sanctuaries or protected reserves,
- expansion of turtle conservation programs and research, and
- preparation of a draft information document detailing a comprehensive turtle tagging program for the Pacific region.