

Sea turtles find friend in court

Mexican fined in import case

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Mexican businessman Antonio Suarez Gutierrez, poised in a perfectly pressed cream-colored suit, obviously was angry. He stood before Federal District Judge William H. Hoever in a Miami courtroom Thursday and between his teeth replied "Si, señor" when asked if he knew the meat of endangered sea turtles that he exported to the United States was falsely identified.

Hoever fined him \$10,000. That is the maximum allowed under the one charge that Suarez would admit to in a long-labored compromise agreement with the U.S. attorney's office in Washington.

The brief action came 2½ years after investigation by federal wildlife officials into the importation through Miami of meat from endangered sea turtles that was falsely labeled as meat from fresh water turtles. There are no import restrictions on fresh water turtles.

Charges still are pending against one Miamian, one Mexican and three companies. The case is the largest in U. S. history involving the smuggling of sea turtle products.

Called major effort

Prosecution of the case is considered a major effort in the international campaign to assist the large brown turtles that struggle out of the Pacific Ocean to lay their eggs on remote Mexican beaches in what has become a desperate effort for survival. Environmental groups around the world have been following the case.

The turtle is the Pacific (olive) Ridley, *Lepidochelys olivacea*, on the world wildlife list as endangered in some areas, including the Mexican coast, and labeled as threatened in others. A major breakthrough in the case came when a scientist with the National Marine Fisheries Service, Sylvia Braddon of Charleston, S.C., developed a method for distinguishing Ridley meat from other kinds of turtle meat.

Suarez until last year operated the major sea turtle processing plant in Mexico. In October he sold the plant to the Mexican government, which has a program for protecting the Ridleys but still allows some to be slaughtered.

Turtles endangered

The Ridleys and the world's other sea turtles are becoming scarce because they are valued for many reasons. Their meat is good to eat. Their shell, skin and other parts are exported to countries that turn them into luxury items. Their eggs are prized around the world as a rejuvenating agent for flagging male sexual capacity.

At one time Suarez also operated what was supposed to be a Ridley turtle hatchery next to his turtle slaughter house near Escobilla beach in the state of Oaxaca.

When hatched, the young turtles were to be released into the Pacific. In 1977 an ABC-Sports TV crew and environmental writer Tim Cahill attended the plant dedication. The subsequent publicity was not all favorable. It raised questions about the hatchery's success rate and Suarez's commitment to the propagation effort.

According to grand jury indictments made last year in Miami, Suarez and others conspired to import 45 tons of Pacific Ridley turtle meat into Miami International Airport in 1978 and 1979, in violation of the Endangered Species Act. To obtain that much meat, it was estimated that 7,500 Ridleys had to be slaughtered. Most of the meat, considered a delicacy, went to the restaurant trade.

Charges still are pending against Juan Alsina Ramirez of Mexico City and Enrique A. Ezpeleta of Miami, president of Jacmel Enterprises, Inc., also a Florida corporation. The two Florida corporations and Suarez's Mexican corporation, *Pesqueria Industrial De Oaxaca, Sociedad Anonima (PIOSA)* also are facing prosecution.

According to the grand jury indictments, Suarez obtained large quantities of sea turtle meat from the southwestern beaches of Mexico. He transported the meat to Mexico City, where Alsina obtained fraudulent documents to import the turtle meat to the U.S., the indictment charges.