

Félix Guillermo Moncada Gavilán helped move Cuba from sea turtle fishing to protection



Rhett Ayers Butler

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For much of the 20th century, Cuba's sea turtles were treated as a fishery. Green turtles were taken for meat, and hawksbills for the patterned shell used in jewelry and ornaments. In the 1980s, legal fisheries landed an average of 836 metric tons a year. Research focused in part on how the catch might be sustained.

The catch was later reduced. From 1994, legal capture was confined to two traditional fishing communities, Nuevitás and Cocodrilo. Minimum sizes and quotas followed. By the time Cuba closed the fishery in 2008, the annual legal catch had fallen below 15 metric tons. A further regulation in 2011 prohibited the capture, use, or trade of sea turtles except for research and conservation.

Félix Guillermo Moncada Gavilán spent his career through much of this shift. The Cuban marine biologist, who died in Havana on June 28th, had worked for more than 40 years at the country's Fisheries Research Center (*Centro de Investigaciones Pesqueras*). He led its sea turtle program and served as Cuba's coordinator for WIDECAST, the regional conservation network.

He had entered turtle research, he once said, with more enthusiasm than certainty. He had little time to prepare and many demands to meet. None of that discouraged him. Colleagues recalled that any mention of marine turtles made him smile and begin explaining them.

His early work was closely tied to fisheries. As Cuba moved towards protection, he studied nesting grounds, migrations, population trends, illegal hunting, and accidental capture. He helped recommend the successive restrictions that preceded the indefinite ban. When describing the policy, he laid out the sequence plainly: first minimum capture sizes, then quotas, and finally a complete closure.

He also stressed that national rules could protect only part of a migratory animal's range. A turtle might nest on one country's beach and feed in the waters of another. Regional co-operation was therefore essential, he said. His tagging and monitoring work connected Cuban nesting populations with the wider Caribbean, while his role in WIDECAST linked Cuban researchers with colleagues elsewhere in the region.

Cuba's turtle research expanded beyond the Fisheries Research Center during the 1990s and early 2000s. The University of Havana, protected-area authorities, volunteers, and other institutions joined the work. Moncada trained students and field workers, led workshops, and co-authored national assessments. A review of Cuban sea turtle research between 1994 and 2021 identified him as its most prolific author, with contributions to 40 of the 78 publications examined.

The ban did not stop all killing. Poaching continued, as did accidental capture in fishing gear. Enforcement varied among protected areas, and a black market still offered turtle meat and shell. Moncada's later research examined those problems. His work had moved from regulating a legal catch to documenting what continued outside the law.

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Banner image: Gavilán. Courtesy of CIP

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