



National Marine Fisheries Service
Southeast Region

NEWS RELEASE

9721 Executive Center Drive, North, St. Petersburg, FL 33702

CONTACT: Chris Smith, Public Affairs Officer
(813) 570-5301
chris.smith@noaa.gov
Bridget Mansfield, Protected Resources Division
(813) 570-5312
bridget.mansfield@noaa.gov

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
SERO 98-007
1/22/98

PUBLIC HEARINGS TO BE HELD ON PROPOSED RULE TO DESIGNATE CRITICAL HABITAT FOR SEA TURTLES IN PUERTO RICO

The National Marine Fisheries Service will host three public hearings in Puerto Rico later this month to obtain public input on the proposed designation of critical habitat areas in waters off Culebra, Mona and Monito Islands to protect the threatened green sea turtle and the endangered hawksbill sea turtle. The agency published a proposed rule under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in the Federal Register on December 19, 1997 to announce its intent to designate the areas.

At each hearing, a short presentation will be made in English, and a Spanish translation will be available. Written and spoken comments will be allowed in either Spanish or English. The hearings will be held at the following locations at indicated dates and times:

Monday, January 26 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Eugene Francis Conference Room, Physics Building, University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

Tuesday, January 27 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, Central Office Auditorium, Munoz Riviera Avenue (Bus Stop 3 _) in Puerta Tierra.

Thursday, January 29th from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Center for Multiple Use in Culebra.

Critical habitat for the green turtle is proposed to include waters extending seaward to 3 nautical miles from the mean high water line of Culebra Island, Puerto Rico. Critical habitat for the hawksbill turtle is proposed to include waters extending seaward to 3 nautical miles from the mean high water line of Mona and Monito Islands, Puerto Rico.

Critical habitat is defined under the ESA as "the specific areas within the geographical area occupied by the species... on which are found those physical or biological features essential to the conservation of the species and which may require special management considerations or protection; and specific areas outside the geographical area occupied by the species...essential for the conservation

of the species.”

Critical habitat designation provides explicit notice to federal agencies and to the public that these areas are vital to the conservation of these species. Designation of critical habitat does not, in and of itself, restrict human activities within an area or mandate any specific management or recovery action. Critical habitat designation in this area is expected to contribute to the recovery of green and hawksbill turtles by alerting public and private entities to the area’s importance and by requiring federal agencies to ensure that any activity that they authorize, fund, or carry out is not likely to adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat or otherwise jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species.

Extensive beds of sea grass in the Culebra archipelago support a large population of juvenile green turtles. These sea grass beds are critical forage habitat for an estimated 150 juvenile green turtles resident in the area at any given time. This area was recognized by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1993 as a Category 1 Resource identifying it as unique and irreplaceable habitat. Additionally, a small population of adult green turtles have been documented in those waters. Hawksbill and leatherback turtles also use the habitat to forage or for access to nesting beaches.

The waters surrounding Mona and Monito Islands are one of the few known remaining locations where hawksbill turtles occur in considerable densities. The hawksbill turtles in the area have been shown to be resident for at least several years. Additionally, Mona Island supports the largest nesting population of hawksbill turtles in the U.S. Caribbean. During the 1996-97 nesting season, 354 nests were recorded. Limited green turtle nesting is also known to occur on Mona Island.

Public comments must be received on or before February 17, 1998. Public comments should be sent to Barbara Schroeder, National Sea Turtle Coordinator, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, 1315 East-West Highway Silver Spring, Maryland 20910.

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