9-2-2015

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LADB Latin America Data Base News & Educational Services

SourceMex

LADB Article Id: 79757
ISSN: 1054-8890

Mexico Launches New Effort to Prevent Poaching of Turtle Eggs in Oaxaca Beaches

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Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2015-09-02

The Mexican government has launched a campaign to protect several species of threatened and endangered sea turtles that reproduce on the country's beaches, enacting measures to prevent poaching of eggs in Oaxaca and other areas. Environmental authorities also announced a plan to reduce the incidence of turtles accidentally being caught in fishing nets off the coast of Baja California, but the plan was deemed insufficient. The inadequate plan put the administration at odds with the US government and Mexican environmental organizations.

Using drones to catch poachers

The government's primary effort involves a scheme to increase monitoring beaches where turtles make their nesting grounds, particularly the olive ridley turtle. The Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) recently acquired two drones from the Secretaría de Marina (SEMAR) to monitor the Escobilla and Morro Ayutla beaches in Oaxaca during the summer months. The two beaches account for 90% of the olive ridley turtle's nestings in Mexico.

"We aim to have 100% coverage of the sites," said Guillermo Haro Bélchez, director of the Procuraduría Federal del Medio Ambiente (PROFEPA), which enforces environmental laws in Mexico. PROFEPA, which spent 67 million pesos (US$4 million) on two drones, plans to use the units for other environmental purposes, including inspections of protected areas as well as industrial sites, mines, and forests.

The sale of turtle eggs continues around the country, even though Mexico imposed a ban on this practice in 1990. The rules have not discouraged poachers from raiding the nesting sites and selling the eggs to restaurants and to patrons at public markets, which serve them as a delicacy (SourceMex, Sept. 20, 1992, and Feb. 4, 2004).

Haro Bélchez said that poachers are more likely to raid nests shortly after the eggs have been laid. After a five- or six-day period of incubation, the eggs start to transform into embryos. "The poachers come at night with their sacks and extract the eggs minutes after they have been laid," said the PROFEPA director. "Then they transfer the eggs to other parties, which are the ones who sell them at the market."

Haro Bélchez said PROFEPA agents are closely monitoring the markets in Juchitán and Puerto Escondido in Oaxaca, which are the main points of sale and distribution. Another popular spot for turtle eggs is the Sonora market in Mexico City.

"The eggs are prepared into a dish containing four or five turtle eggs at a cost of 70 to 80 pesos (US $4.00 to US$4.75)," said Haro Bélchez. "In some states, turtle eggs have become part of the local gastronomic culture. However, our goal is to eliminate the sale, extraction, and distribution of turtle eggs. We have to conserve the integrity of the nests to save the species in danger of extinction."

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Even with the open sale of dishes prepared with turtle eggs in some markets in Oaxaca, the increased monitoring by PROFEPA has forced merchants to sell the eggs in a clandestine manner. Sometimes there are no eggs to sell. "My suppliers have not brought me any eggs. Apparently, they have encountered a lot of problems collecting them," one merchant told the daily newspaper Reforma.

While the scarcity of turtle eggs is attributed to strong monitoring efforts by Mexican environmental authorities, PROFEPA and the Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (CONANP) have enacted some conservation measures in recent years that have increased nestings at many beaches around the country, said Cronica.com.

A recent binational turtle effort in Texas and Tamaulipas confirmed an increase in numbers on both sides of the border. Some 159 nests of Kemp's ridley turtle were counted on the Texas Gulf this summer, up from 119 in 2014. "In the Mexican state of Tamaulipas—across the border from Brownsville, where 95 percent of all Kemp's ridley nests are found—the number had reached 13,927 as of Aug. 17, slightly more than the 12,053 recorded last year," said the San Antonio-Express News.

The Centro Mexicano de la Tortuga, a unit of the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), said most of the major species of sea turtles either make their home on Mexican beaches or use them for nesting sites, including green turtles, olive ridley (golfina), Kemp's ridley (lora), leatherback (laud), hawksbill (carey), and loggerhead (caguama).

Mexico fails to protect turtles from fishing fleets

Even though the Mexican government has made major strides to protect turtle-nesting grounds, critics—particularly the US government—say environmental officials have not done enough to prevent accidental deaths of turtles caught in fishing nets. The concerns center on the endangered North Pacific loggerhead sea turtles in the Gulf of Ulloa on the coast of Baja California.

Earlier this year, the Mexican government announced a plan to establish a protected area in the Gulf of Ulloa. Any fishing boats venturing into the area would be fitted with use-modified equipment to greatly cut down on accidental capture of loggerhead turtles. The regulations required the fishing fleets to use modified gear, establishing restrictions on gillnets, longlines, and traps. Futhermore, 30% of vessels within the area would be required to have on-board scientific observers, and up to 70% would need to employ video surveillance in conjunction with satellite monitoring of vessels.

After review, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)'s fisheries service concluded that the new regulations were not sufficient to prevent the accidental catch of loggerhead turtles, especially because the regulations still allowed for a high number of accidental catches and were not going to be implemented for some time. As a result, the US for the first time issued a "negative certification" for accidental capture of a protected living marine resource under the High Seas Driftnet Fishing Moratorium Protection Act. The designation could result in a US embargo against Mexican seafood caught in the area. Most of the fishing fleets are in the area to catch halibut and sharks. The turtles become entangled in gillnets or hooked on longlines and drown. The dispute is similar to other controversies involving Mexican tuna fleets, which often snare dolphins in their nets (SourceMex, Sept. 21, 2011, and April 22, 2015).

The US decision to apply the negative certification to Mexico brought objections from the Comisión Nacional De Acuacultura y Pesca (CONAPESCA), which said the agency is "committed" to protect sea turtles.

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Alejandro Olivera, a representative for Centro para la Diversidad Biológica, said the negative certification should not come as a surprise, since his organization has frequently complained to CONAPESCA that practices by fishing fleets in the area threatened loggerhead turtles.

"It is evident that the new protected area proposed by CONAPESCA was insufficient because it allows the accidental capture of as many as 90 turtles before a moratorium is imposed," Olivera said in an interview with the online news site Sinembargo.

Another problem is the delay in implementing the regulations that were established in April. "This was not the adequate solution to the problem. The rules were not going to go into effect this year, but next year," said Gustavo Alanis, director del Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA). "[Under those circumstances], these regulations would not be very effective and would not solve the problem."

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