

GENERATING MORE SUPPORT TO REDUCE SEA TURTLE BYCATCH ON THE HIGH SEAS

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During the last decade, the United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), regional fishing management organizations (RFMOs), international instruments, and individual nations have worked to identify and reduce the detrimental effects of high seas fisheries on sea turtles. In 2005 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on countries to close fishing areas where large numbers of sea turtles and other protected species are captured, and FAO's Committee on Fisheries adopted "Guidelines to Reduce Sea Turtle Mortality in Fishing Operations." In recent years, five RFMOs have addressed the need to reduce sea turtle bycatch (the unintentional capture of non-target species) in various ways; two of these RFMOs were encouraged to act by a 2006 resolution passed by the International Sea Turtle Symposium (ISTS) asking them to address this issue. Despite some progress, tens of thousands of sea turtles are captured, injured and killed in high seas fisheries each year as the world's fishing fleets increase capacity and effort. The lack of international commitment to reducing bycatch and the current RFMO focus on declining stocks of tuna from overfishing, such as dramatic declines of big-eye tuna in the Eastern Pacific Ocean, has resulted in the RFMOs failing to provide sufficient attention to bycatch reduction or back-sliding on agreements. This current state of affairs gives greater impetus for action within the international instruments for sea turtles, such as the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Marine Turtles and Their Habitats of the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia (IOSEA) and Inter American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (IAC). Parties to the IAC are expected to adopt "Guidelines for Reducing Sea Turtle Mortality, drafted by its Scientific Committee, at the Fourth Conference of the IAC Parties in November 2008. This presentation will review the status of international efforts by the RFMOs, international agreements and the world's organizations to reduce the bycatch of sea turtles on the high seas and will recommend steps that need to be taken, such as expanding observer coverage, data collection and promotion of mechanisms to reduce bycatch within international instruments. The ability of the United States to promote bycatch reduction through technological advances and experiments and the potential to generate international cooperation through bilateral and multilateral discussions under new U.S. legislation that requires countries exporting fish and fish products to the United States to match U.S. bycatch reduction on the high seas also will be reviewed.