

The Road to Conservation

Sea turtles fulfill their ecological roles on a healthy planet where all peoples value and celebrate their continued survival.

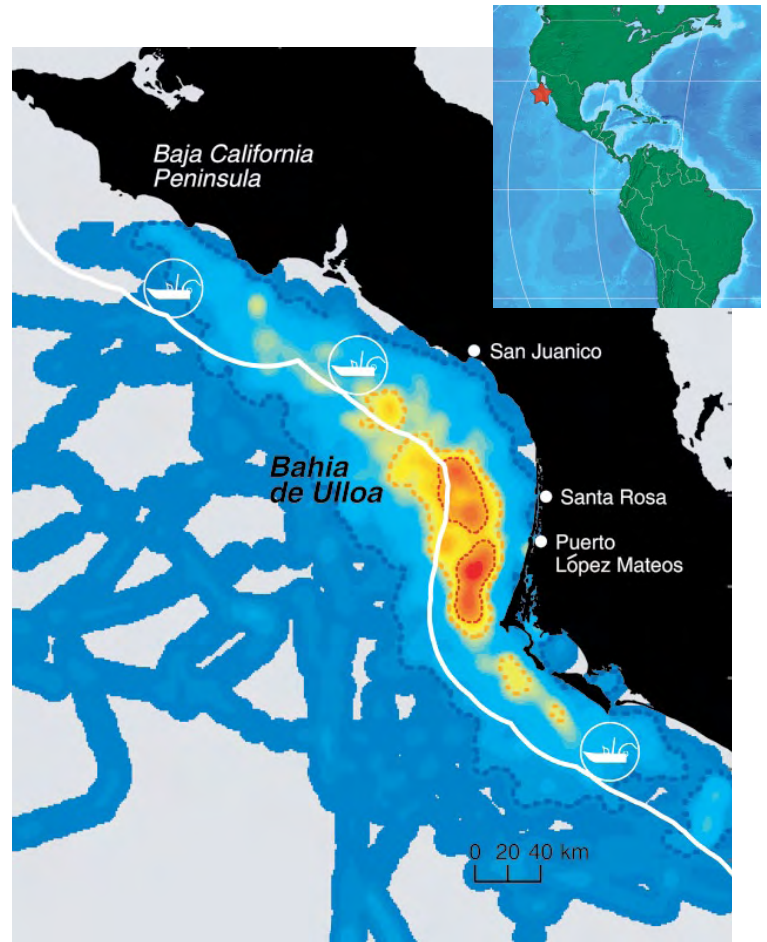
—Vision Statement of the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group

If you don't know where you are going, then any road will get you there. A clear vision of global sea turtle conservation is where the road begins.

Conservation of sea turtles is not simple. It is confounded by turtles' vast marine distributions, the many unsolved mysteries of their natural history, and the fact that sea turtles and the hazards to their survival are not distributed evenly over the face of the planet. *Climate change*, for instance, could spell the total loss of nesting beaches in the Maldives, but not so everywhere. *Direct take* of turtles is a serious issue in the Kei Islands of Indonesia, but not in the southeastern United States. *Coastal development*, *fishing impacts*, and *marine pollution and pathogens* all exact their toll on sea turtles with varying degrees of intensity, depending on the site, season, and species. Given the different approaches needed in different situations and the relative urgency of them all, conservationists must be strategic in their approach.

Being strategic means choosing priorities, balancing reactive efforts with proactive efforts, and constantly checking progress and redirecting the work on the basis of new information. Principal among the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group's global priority-setting tools are assessments to determine sea turtles' extinction risk for the IUCN's *Red List of Threatened Species*. The aforementioned five hazards, the "top 10" list of the most threatened sea turtle populations, and the "key unsolved mysteries" (see www.SeaTurtleStatus.org to learn more) are other useful prioritization tools derived from the group's "Burning Issues" workshops. Furthermore, SWOT gathers and synthesizes global-scale data with the aim to measure trends and help frame priorities for sea turtle conservation. Countless other nonprofit organizations and governments also look at national and local priorities for sea turtle conservation, and the literature is rife

Though arguably still the most endangered sea turtle species on Earth, an IUCN ranking of "critically endangered" has helped to focus conservation attention on the Kemp's ridley, which is now on the road to recovery. © NPS PHOTO



Identification of high-use areas for loggerheads off Baja (shown in orange and red) using satellite telemetry has stimulated efforts to create protected zones, an example of how innovative research tools help to set priorities for conservation. FIGURE COURTESY OF HOYT PECKHAM, DAVID DIAZ, ANDREAS WALLI, GEORGITA RUIZ, LARRY CROWDER, AND WALLACE J. NICHOLS, FROM THE ARTICLE "SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES BYCATCH JEOPARDIZES ENDANGERED PACIFIC LOGGERHEAD TURTLES" IN *PLoS ONE*, ISSUE 10, OCT. 2007.

with action plans, recovery plans, strategies, and templates that view the challenge from different angles and on varying scales.

The best prioritization template for sea turtle conservation will comprise parts of all these various schemes, but adaptability must be at its core. This implies perpetually reviewing and upgrading priorities—evaluating the most important species and populations on which to focus, the life stages most vulnerable to the most threatening hazards, and the conservation actions that will yield the greatest results and the greatest "bang for the buck" investments.

Even as we strategize in workshops and behind computers, "just do it" must remain the conservationist's credo. Conservation cannot wait for the perfect strategy to be penned. Actions that do no harm and employ the precautionary principle must be constantly pursued, because what we learn from doing the work of conservation will be the greatest source of wisdom in adapting our strategies for the future.

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