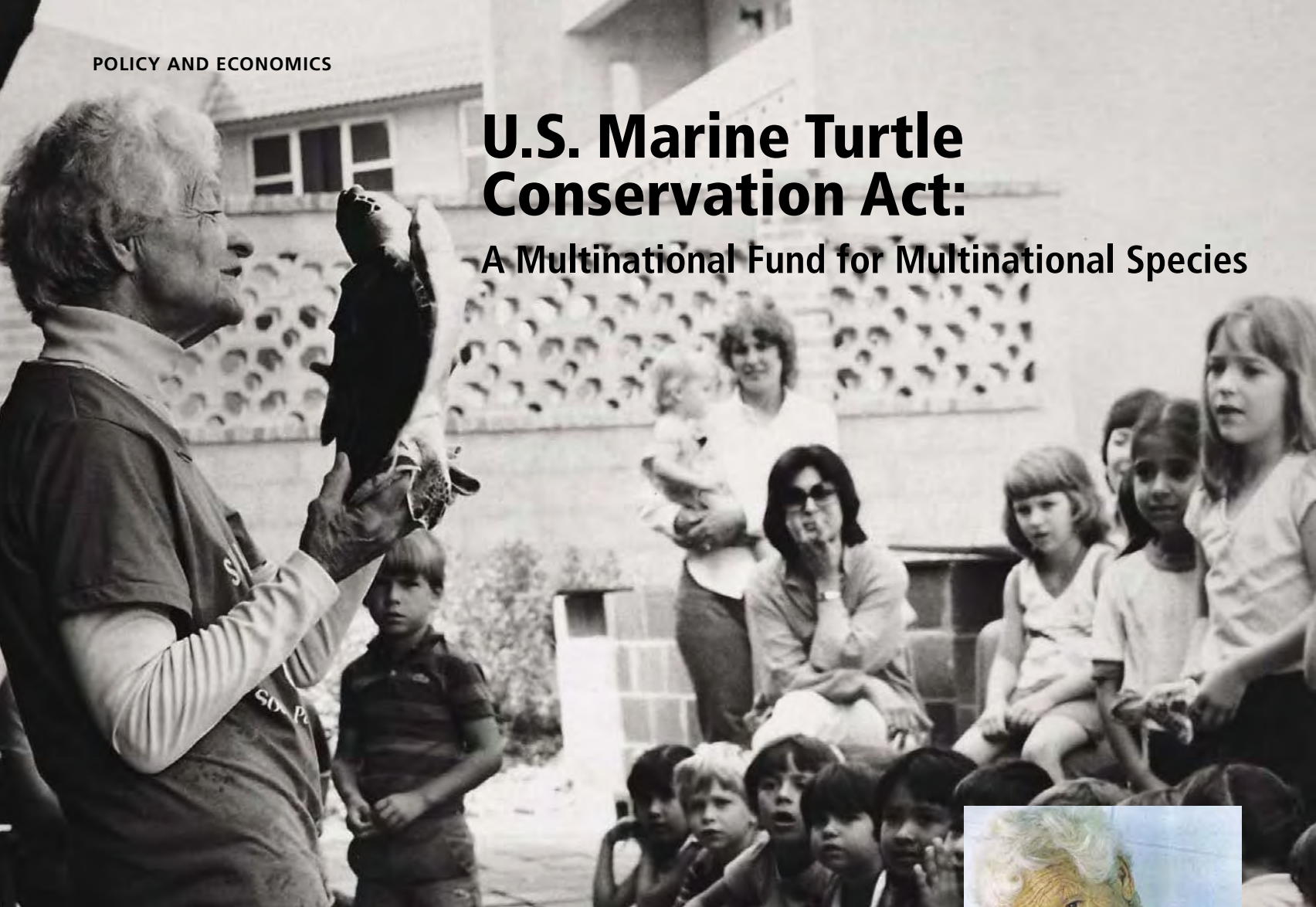


# U.S. Marine Turtle Conservation Act:

## A Multinational Fund for Multinational Species



Well known for her commitment to sea turtle conservation education, Ila Loetscher is seen here discussing the plight of the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle in the Gulf of Mexico. © EVELYN SIZEMORE / SEA TURTLE, INC.

The Marine Turtle Conservation Act (MTCA) is the newest of several U.S. funds to support the conservation of multinational species overseas. The initiative to create the MTCA was spearheaded by The Ocean Conservancy and WWF and supported by numerous conservation groups and members of the international sea turtle community. Along the way, the bill attracted several congressional supporters, including one unexpected but important advocate.

In 2003, on the day that the MTCA was introduced to the U.S. Senate for consideration, Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma surprised senators and the conservation community alike when he provided a primer on sea turtle biology and regaled the packed hearing room with tales of a young man who had worked in Texas alongside the legendary Ila Loetscher, “the Turtle Lady of South Padre Island.” Together, they had protected endangered Kemp’s Ridley nests, watched over hatchlings heading out to sea, and cared for incapacitated turtles. Just as Ila’s legacy lives on in thousands of other people she inspired, that particular young man remembered her message of conservation when he became a powerful U.S. Senator. Shortly after Senator Inhofe’s memorable hearing, the Senate passed the MTCA. In 2004, it was passed by the House and signed into law by President George W. Bush.

The MTCA and the other multinational conservation funds—for African and Asian elephants, great apes, rhinoceroses, and tigers—are administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Although the program is relatively small, the funding it provides is critical for imperiled wildlife and leverages significant additional support, including money, material, and human resources. For fiscal year 2005, the MTCA received US\$100,000 in start-up funds. The

following year, the United States provided US\$5.6 million for the four mammal funds and US\$700,000 for marine turtles. As funds are appropriated annually, the conservation community mounts a major lobbying effort each year to ensure that these contributions continue.

Since its establishment, the MTCA has awarded \$711,704 in grants to 32 projects around the world to address the most pressing threats faced by sea turtles. The focus of the USFWS is to support nesting beach projects for the most globally significant nesting populations, such as loggerheads in Oman, leatherbacks in the Pacific and West Africa, hawksbills in the Caribbean and Indian Oceans, and *arribada* olive Ridley nesting populations. Additionally, the USFWS strives to support good capacity-building opportunities and the relatively new international bodies such as the Inter-American Sea Turtle Convention and the Indian Ocean Southeast Asian Marine Turtle Agreement, as well as community-based social and economic conservation projects.

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Ila Loetscher and a Kemp's Ridley sea turtle. © EVELYN SIZEMORE / SEA TURTLE, INC.