

BURNING ISSUES 7 UPDATE: Defining Guidelines for Important Marine Turtle Areas



By the Important Marine Turtle Area (IMTA) Working Group and the IUCN-SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group

The IUCN-SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group's (MTSG) Burning Issues (BI) initiative is a collaborative, inclusive, and science-based effort to draw the most accurate and comprehensive picture of global sea turtle status and conservation priorities in order to provide policymakers, managers, funders, and others with guidance to support the most urgent and effective sea turtle conservation actions. The BI initiative enhances and supports the MTSG network, and the resulting outputs are widely used by people working to study and protect sea turtles worldwide.

Ten years after the seminal results from the first six BI workshops were published, a seventh BI process (BI-7) is under way to update past outputs, such as regional management units (RMUs), with new scientific data and expertise. In addition, the MTSG is moving toward setting finer-scale priorities for sea turtle's at-sea habitats by developing Important Marine Turtle Areas (IMTAs).

Why IMTAs?

Among widespread migratory megafauna species, marine turtles are underrepresented in global and regional priority-setting processes. One reason is that currently no global source provides the information needed to identify important areas that need marine turtle protection. Though the MTSG has previously defined RMUs for each species, they cover vast geographies that encompass the entire life cycle of each subpopulation and do not identify important habitats within those ranges. To fill this important gap, the global MTSG membership, a group of more than 300 marine turtle specialists with diverse expertise, has developed criteria and a process for identifying global IMTAs. The IMTA process parallels similar initiatives for seabirds

(Important Bird Areas) and marine mammals (Important Marine Mammal Areas), thus ensuring that biodiversity assessment and prioritization processes are comprehensive and comparable across multiple taxa of marine megafauna.

What Are IMTAs?

The goal of identifying IMTAs is to provide a robust, globally consistent framework to support conservation and management of areas that are important for marine turtles at multiple scales. The MTSG defines IMTAs as "discrete areas within existing marine turtle regional management units (RMUs) that are of particular biological significance for the persistence of marine turtles, and/or where the contributions of marine turtles to traditions and cultures of local people are particularly significant." Although the biological and cultural significance of any area where a marine turtle is present might deem it important, IMTAs are intended to reflect the areas of most significant importance for each RMU.

ABOVE: A Kemp's ridley hatchling makes its way to the sea at Padre Island National Seashore, Texas, U.S.A. © Kyle Christensen / @bluelifewild

What Criteria and Processes Identify IMTAs?

The proposed IMTA criteria are designed to be inclusive of the many differences that exist across the ranges of all marine turtle species, including human cultures, ecosystems, and data availability. The criteria allow different types of knowledge to be integrated into IMTA assessment efforts, which will be driven by regional and local experts. IMTAs will be identified through a two-step process. First, a candidate area must fall into at least one of two categories: (a) biologically significant or (b) culturally significant. Second, the area will be evaluated against several criteria to demonstrate its disproportionate importance to a

given region. The tables that follow, taken from *Important Marine Turtle Areas: Guidelines 1.0 (August 2021)*, provide details on those categories and criteria.

What Next for IMTAs?

The process by which specific IMTAs will be defined is still being refined, but the MTSG anticipates it to be highly participatory and to offer many points of entry for all stakeholders, similar to the way IMTA criteria were developed. Future phases will involve testing and refining the guidelines and criteria with regional partners. See the IMTA guidelines at <https://www.iucn-mtsg.org/imtas> for more details, and stay tuned for news about updated RMUs and other outputs emerging from the BI-7 process! •

STEP 1: An area must fall into at least one of these two categories:

CATEGORIES	DEFINITION
Biologically significant	Areas that are important for courtship, mating, nesting, and hatching; areas and conditions that provide an important habitat on which a species or population depends for vital processes such as feeding, resting, and ontogenetic development; areas used as migration corridors or other movements, thereby connecting distinct life-cycle areas or the different parts of the year-round range of a nonmigratory population.
Culturally significant	Socio-economic and cultural activities that occur within an area and are compatible with conservation of marine turtles and their habitats so that they do not degrade the integrity of marine turtle habitat and do not entail unsustainable use of marine turtles; activities specifically may include areas associated with marine turtles where the species have a salient role in shaping cultural heritage, as reflected in the fundamental roles in diet, materials, medicine, or social practices, or a combination thereof; areas that contain prehistoric, historic, or contemporary cultural resources related to marine turtles, or a combination thereof; or areas that embody traditional or contemporary beliefs or practices of cultural, religious or spiritual significance, in relation to marine turtles occurring at regional or local scales.

STEP 2: The area identified in Step 1 must meet at least one of the following criteria, as described by supporting information, research data, or other evidence:

CRITERIA	DEFINITION
Relative importance to the population	Areas of particular importance to turtle populations because of age, class of turtles, number of individuals included, or other defining characteristics (e.g., > 50% of total RMU nesting abundance, high density of foraging turtles regularly observed or inferred from tracking data).
Species or populations of particular conservation concern	Areas containing habitat important for the survival and recovery of species or populations at particularly high risk of extinction or under most-severe threats, ideally according to an established conservation status assessment framework (e.g., IUCN Red List Critically Endangered, Endangered, or Vulnerable; MTSG's conservation priorities portfolio; national-scale endangered species lists; documented significant historical depletion).
Aggregations or congregations	Areas with underlying qualities that support important concentrations of a species or population, especially those composed of multiple species or populations, or areas that are important to the persistence of turtle populations or human cultural practices related to marine turtles.
Distinctiveness	Areas that sustain populations with important genetic, plus behaviorally or ecologically distinctive, characteristics, including refugia from environmental change, or areas of distinct or important cultural significance in relation to marine turtles.
Diversity	Areas containing a habitat that supports an important diversity of species, populations, genetic lineages, or human cultural practices (e.g., area regularly supports three or more species, RMUs, or genetic management units).