



Statement of

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Saving the Ancient Mariners:
The Marine Turtle Conservation Act of 2003

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am Brooks Yeager, Vice President of the Global Threats Program at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of WWF and its 1.2 million members in the United States and more than 5 million members worldwide. WWF is the largest private organization working internationally to protect wildlife and wildlife habitats. WWF currently supports conservation efforts in more than 120 countries, including marine turtle conservation projects in 45 countries.

Marine turtles are the real ancient mariners. Turtles swam our seas long before the Polynesians set sail to explore the islands of the Pacific, before Christopher Columbus landed on the shores of North America, before Ferdinand Magellan's ships circumnavigated the globe, before Samuel Taylor Coleridge penned his famous *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Having evolved more than a hundred million years ago, they are among the oldest living creatures on Earth. Marine turtles survived the extinction of the dinosaurs. Whether they will survive the next few decades, however, is an open question.

Mr. Chairman, we enthusiastically support your legislation, the Marine Turtle Conservation Act of 2003 (H.R. 3378). WWF believes that enactment of this bill will help ensure that sea turtles are around for our children and grandchildren to appreciate. There was impressive bipartisan support for this bill in the Senate when it was approved last October. We are hopeful that there will be similar bipartisan support in the House and that the bill will be approved expeditiously.

Global Plight of Marine Turtles

Marine turtles crawl from nests on beaches as small hatchlings to spend their lives in the oceans. Many fall prey to crabs, birds and small mammals even before they reach the sea. Those that survive travel the oceans, making use of many different habitats including coral reefs, sea grass beds and the high seas. Some make almost incredible long distance migrations, crossing and re-crossing even the largest ocean basins. Some live more than 70 years. All return to land only to leave eggs on the very beaches from which they emerged many years before, demonstrating truly astonishing powers of navigation.

Perhaps the most fascinating of the world's seven species of marine turtles are the leatherbacks. These gentle giants grow larger, migrate farther and dive deeper than any other marine turtles. Frequently reaching 6 feet long and weighing more than 1,000 pounds, leatherbacks are among the largest living reptiles. The largest leatherback ever recorded, an enormous male found stranded on a beach in Wales in 1988, was over 8 feet long and weighed 2,019 pounds. Their migrations are just as amazing as they literally swim across the oceans, traveling highways of currents in ways that we're just beginning to understand. They can dive to depths of 4000 feet and stay down for as long as an hour in search of their favorite food, jellyfish.

Marine turtles were once much more numerous. Christopher Columbus and other early European explorers marveled at the great abundance of turtles in the Americas. One reported that "vessels, which have lost their latitude in hazy weather, have steered entirely by the noise which these creatures make in swimming..." And as Jeremy Jackson, the leading marine ecologist and WWF Board member discussed in his pathbreaking July 2001 article in Science, evidence of the abundance of turtles in areas

of the Caribbean prior to the onset of significant harvest by humans is such that one could imagine 'walking from island to island on the backs of Green Turtles browsing in vast forests of turtle grass.' (J. Jackson, et. al., "Historical Overfishing and the Recent Collapse of Coastal Ecosystems," Science, July 27, 2001, p. 629).

Today, marine turtles are in serious trouble around the globe. Six of the world's seven marine turtle species are endangered or critically endangered, as classified by the IUCN-World Conservation Union Red List, and are listed as threatened or endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973. All seven are listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), meaning that international trade in their parts and products is prohibited. Marine turtle populations have now declined to the point that long-term survival of the loggerhead, green, hawksbill, Kemp's ridley, olive ridley and leatherback turtles in the wild is in serious jeopardy.

This is especially true for leatherbacks. There is increasing concern about the plight of leatherback populations, particularly in the eastern Pacific where their numbers have plummeted. Some populations in the region have declined by more than 90% in the last twenty years, leading to serious concern about the risk of extinction. A growing number of marine biologists fear that, without dramatic conservation action, the leatherback sea turtle will go extinct within a decade and the loggerhead sea turtle will continue sliding toward a similar fate.

The threats are serious. Marine turtles have been -- and are still, in many places -- hunted for their meat, shell, oil, and leather and their eggs, believed in many cultures to have aphrodisiac properties, are collected for eating. They are also killed as bycatch in many fisheries, and habitats key to their survival are rapidly being degraded. Because they live long lives, mature relatively late, and migrate long distances, marine turtles are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of human exploitation and habitat loss.

As well as playing important roles in balancing coastal ecosystems, marine turtles play a significant role in many coastal economies. Increasingly, communities are finding ways to benefit from turtles economically while also conserving them. 'Sea turtle tourism', in which visitors come to watch sea turtles lay their eggs and hatchlings make their way to the sea, is a recent phenomenon, only becoming widespread in the 1990s. Worldwide, at least 170,000 visitors participate in sea turtle tours on land and sea each year. Marine turtle-based tourism brings in more than twice as much money for coastal areas and developing countries as the sale of sea turtle products like meat, leather and eggs, according to the preliminary results of an economic analysis commissioned by WWF. The study, to be released in full later this year, confirms what we've long suspected -- sea turtles are worth more to local economies alive than dead. The study results also indicate that worldwide decline in sea turtle populations jeopardizes other ocean-based economic sectors, like fishing industries that depend on healthy marine and coastal ecosystems.

It is crucial that we take every opportunity to ensure the survival of marine turtles. The Marine Turtle Conservation Act is critically needed to ensure that the successes of ongoing sea turtle conservation efforts in the U.S. are not lost when the animals migrate through other countries.

Success of Multi-National Species Conservation Funds

The Marine Turtle Conservation Act is patterned after multinational species conservation bills set up to protect elephants, tigers and rhinos, great apes, and neotropical migratory birds. The Multinational Species Conservation Fund established by these bills supports scientific monitoring, habitat preservation, law enforcement efforts to control poaching and illegal trade, disease prevention, and public education in the range states where the mammals and birds are found. This approach of setting aside a modest amount of money to provide support for projects crucial to particular species has already proven its effectiveness in conservation efforts for rhinos, tigers, and other species. These funds have an excellent record of advancing conservation goals, building conservation partnerships and leveraging millions of dollars from private and other sources, and building goodwill abroad. They are supported by a diverse coalition of conservationists, circuses, sportsmen, zoos, veterinarians, and animal protection groups.

The Multinational Species Conservation Fund has been very effective in arresting the decline of endangered species. The projects supported through this program have resulted in clear, concrete results with very tangible outcomes. Though rhinos, great apes, tigers, and elephants remain at risk, the successes are promising as demonstrated by just a few examples:

- Black rhinos in Africa have just begun to turn the corner, after a precipitous population crash from 70,000 in 1970 to 2,300 in 1993. International conservation efforts, aided substantially by the Multinational Species Conservation Fund, have resulted in an increase to about 3,100 in 2002.
- Despite continuing warfare and political instability, mountain gorillas in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo have increased from 600 in 1989 to at least 700 today, an increase of 17 %.
- Tigers and Asian elephants in Cambodia have benefited from intensive efforts over the past three years to create and staff protected areas in the largest unbroken natural area remaining in Southeast Asia. There are now five protected areas with rangers on the ground in the Southwest of the country, where there were no functioning protected areas before.
- Tigers in Russia have benefited enormously from anti-poaching programs and expansion of protected areas in the past ten years. Only 250 Amur (Siberian) tigers were left in the wild in 1993, and today there are believed to be more than 400.
- The last 300 Sumatran rhinos would already have succumbed to poachers if not for the Rhino Protection Units supported by the Multinational Species Conservation Fund and its partners.
- Indian rhino populations in Nepal and India have increased 50% in ten years to 2,400 today. Translocations funded by the Multinational Species Conservation Fund have repopulated regions in Nepal where rhinos had become extinct.

The Multinational Species Conservation Fund has been especially effective in encouraging local and international matching contributions from private organizations and foreign governments. The program's \$31 million in grants over the past thirteen years has leveraged over \$107 million in additional funding through public-private

partnerships. In this way, a small investment by the United States has contributed in a very meaningful way to the survival of major species that Americans value greatly.

The Fund has also helped to shape a positive image of the United States in countries where these programs are implemented. Continued support by the United States not only conserves highly threatened species, but also makes friends for America in the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. As our field colleagues report, it means a great deal in range states that the U.S. government is demonstrating a global commitment by acting as a partner to help save critically endangered species.

WWF has partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on a number of occasions through the Multinational Species Conservation Fund, and in addition to receiving grants, we have invested significant matching dollars in selected projects. Our experience has been that the program has been well managed, and that administrative costs have been notably low. The monies have been consistently focused on small-scale, on-the-ground projects, and leveraging additional funds and working closely with range states have been consistent priorities. The Marine Turtle Conservation Act would be a welcome addition to the programs already in place for other flagship species.

The Marine Turtle Conservation Act of 2003

Though marine turtles are in trouble, we are cautiously optimistic. Trouble does not necessarily mean doom if action is taken quickly and support is sustained. There is already evidence that conservation efforts can be effective in saving turtles. The story of Kemp's ridley turtles, which nest mainly on one beach in the Gulf of Mexico and forage in the Gulf and along the eastern U.S. seaboard, is an important example. Nesting populations fell from 40,000 to 300 females between 1947 and 1985. Videos from the 1940s show trains of pack mules carrying off eggs from nesting beaches. Thanks to more than 30 years of nesting beach protection and conservation at sea, the nesting population is recovering. Approximately 3,600 turtles nested in 2003.

The focus of the Marine Turtle Conservation Act is to provide much-needed assistance in the conservation of marine turtles and their nesting habitats in foreign countries. This bill will assist in the recovery and protection of marine turtles by providing financial assistance for projects in foreign countries to protect nesting marine turtles and their habitats, prevent illegal trade in marine turtle parts and products, and support community outreach and education. The legislation authorizes \$5 million annually to implement this program.

Although programs exist around the world for turtle protection, funding for these activities falls far short of what is needed. This bill will make a crucial difference for the future of these remarkable animals. We applaud Chairman Gilchrest and the bill's many sponsors for their leadership, and we urge its swift passage. We once more note the bipartisan support for the bill in the Senate and note also that this bill is supported by the National Fisheries Institute, representing the seafood industry, as well as numerous conservation groups.

WWF has been working all over the world to protect sea turtles and their habitats for more than 40 years. Our work to protect sea turtles is detailed in a recently published report, *Conserving Marine Turtles on a Global Scale*, which is appended to my testimony and which I would ask be included in the record. We believe that the projects described

in the report are typical of the projects that the legislation would seek to encourage. A few examples of current turtle conservation projects:

- In the Kei islands of Indonesia, approximately 100 critically endangered Pacific leatherbacks are killed each year. Local people believe that their ancestors require them to hunt for their ritual ceremonies and daily subsistence. This annual mortality level is too high for the survival of the species. WWF is working with villagers to reduce turtle hunting. The first step of this work has been to assess the socio-cultural background of the turtle hunting practice, including traditional knowledge of turtle ecology, local hunting management techniques, and the customary decision making framework in eight villages that conduct annual turtle hunts.
- Also in Indonesia, WWF is working closely with NOAA researchers to tag leatherbacks that nest in the Papua province, which supports possibly the last large nesting aggregation of the leatherback turtle in the Pacific Ocean. Scientists are fitting turtles with satellite transmitters that track their movements in order to increase knowledge about migration patterns and also studying population genetics. The scientific methodology used is carefully designed to respect local traditional beliefs and practices. In the same area, WWF is working with villagers to develop and support anti-poaching patrols on important nesting beaches.
- In Peru, illegal consumption of turtle meat remains a serious problem. WWF has worked in Peru with local partners on various initiatives, including law enforcement on land and at sea, initiatives against illegal consumption, and environmental education and awareness campaigns with local fishermen, villagers and public authorities. One of the outstanding achievements of this work was the recent 67% reduction of the number of commercial establishments selling turtle meat in the Pisco Paracas area. This was a direct result of numerous control operatives set-up to prevent both the capture and sale of marine turtles.
- In Costa Rica, WWF is supporting a successful tourism project in Tortugero, on the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica, is the largest nesting site of the green turtle in the Atlantic Ocean. This project, developed by the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, has demonstrated the economic benefits of live turtle versus dead ones. During the 1960's nearly every green turtle coming to nest there was taken for the turtle soup export market. Today, some 50,000 tourists come to Tortugero to see the nesting turtles and other wildlife. The local community benefits directly from the tourism through becoming certified guides for night turtle watching excursions, and by other tourism related services, which generate an annual gross income of close to \$7 million.
- In the Northern Caribbean, WWF's wildlife trade monitoring program, TRAFFIC, is working with governments and other stakeholders to reduce illegal trade in sea turtles parts and products. According to a recent TRAFFIC assessment, illegal trade, over-exploitation and a lack of management resources continue to threaten populations in some countries and territories of the region. Ongoing work to reduce illegal trade includes training of wildlife enforcement personnel and public education efforts, such as the Buyer Beware campaign, a joint program with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designed to educate tourists about responsible wildlife and plant purchases when abroad.

A Comprehensive Strategy for Marine Turtle Conservation

To conserve marine turtles effectively requires conservation efforts that are carried out across entire oceans, transcend national boundaries, and involve a wide range of decision makers and stakeholders. In recent years, there has been an increased effort to support conservation on regional and global scales. International agreements focused specifically on marine turtles now exist for the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, Atlantic Coast of Africa, and the Inter-American region. Also, certain global treaties, including the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), apply to marine turtles. Along with other conservation organizations, WWF has actively promoted such regional and international agreements, and is working with the Secretariats of these organizations and their member countries to strengthen their implementation. WWF is also working with fishermen and scientists to improve turtle conservation. This includes working closely with NOAA to support their efforts and extend the advances made by NOAA and the fishing sector to fisheries in other parts of the world.

Nesting beach protection is clearly a critical element of a comprehensive, effective strategy. To date, however, funding for this work has been far less than what has been needed. The Marine Turtle Conservation Act wisely focuses on the conservation of nesting marine turtles and nesting habitats. The funds provided by the Act will fill a critical gap, and by so doing, help to conserve these amazing creatures.

Conclusion

The long-term survival of marine turtles is in serious jeopardy. Like elephants, tigers, rhinos and great apes, they are magnificent and visible symbols for global conservation. Also like these flagship species, they are in need of our help.

In the field, we have learned the hard way that successful conservation measures for critically endangered species are not cheap or easy. But we have also learned that strategic investments and long-term commitments pay off. The Marine Turtle Conservation Act is an important opportunity to support international conservation of threatened sea turtles abroad. It will ensure that the successes of ongoing sea turtle conservation efforts in the United States are not lost when the animals travel overseas. The Act will advance conservation goals, build conservation partnerships and leverage significant resources from private and other sources and build goodwill abroad. It will play a vital role in the survival of these ancient mariners.

In closing, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, WWF would like to thank you for your leadership on wildlife conservation issues generally and your attention to this matter in particular. We would also like to thank you for the opportunity to address you today. We hope to return in the future to celebrate the success of this Committee's efforts to conserve marine turtles.

Attachments:

2004. WWF. *Conserving Marine Turtles on a Global Scale.*

2003. WWF. *Marine Turtles: Global voyagers threatened with extinction.*

2003. TRAFFIC North America and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. *Buyer Beware: Caribbean.*