

National Marine Fisheries Service Ignores Its Science And Rejects Proven Sea Turtle Protections

The Problem:

All six species of sea turtles found in U.S. waters are listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. One of the largest threats to sea turtles is accidental capture, or bycatch, in commercial fishing gear. The Atlantic longline fishery for swordfish, tuna, and sharks deploys thousands of baited hooks each day on lines reaching up to 40 miles long. Sea turtles attracted to longline bait can be hooked externally on a flipper, entangled in the lines, or captured on a swallowed hook. Captured turtles may drown when they cannot surface to breathe. Many turtles are released alive but subsequently die from their injuries. With the enormous number of hooks set by the longline fishery in the Atlantic, turtles may face repeated capture and compounded injuries.



Despite three years of area closures in turtle “hotspots”, this fishery has continued to catch hundreds of leatherbacks and loggerheads each year. Capture estimates for 2001 and 2002 exceed 1,500 turtles a year, well in excess of authorized limits. Data for 2003 are not yet available but are expected to be comparable.

The Solution:

As a result of three years of experiments, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has determined that replacing commonly used “J” hooks with large circle hooks can significantly reduce the capture and death of endangered sea turtles. Specifically, the use of 18/0 size circle hooks has been found to reduce interactions by 65-90% and improve the catch of some target fish. Large circle hooks also reduce the severity of sea turtle interactions because turtles are far less likely to swallow circle hooks and become hooked internally.

NMFS Ignores Its Science:

Despite the publication of a proposed rule in February that would have required 18/0 circle hooks throughout the Atlantic longline fishery, it now appears that NMFS has reversed course. Instead of gear proven effective through experimental testing, NMFS now plans to allow the use of smaller 16/0 hooks throughout most of the fishery. These smaller hooks are largely untested, but NMFS acknowledges that they do not perform any better than traditional “J” hooks in reducing the sea turtle interaction rate.

What You Can Do:

Call NMFS Administrator Dr. Bill Hogarth and demand that NMFS follow the best science available and require the use of 18/0 hooks throughout the Atlantic longline fishery. Let him know that we will not accept putting sea turtles at increased risk of extinction when solutions that are good for turtles and good for fishermen are already available.

For more information, please contact Marydele Donnelly (The Ocean Conservancy: 202-857-1684) or Charlotte Hudson (Oceana: 202-833-3900).