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NATIONAL MARINE TURTLE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, considerable evidence has accrued that indicates a decline in populations of all marine turtle species. As a consequence, three species (Kemp's ridley, hawksbill and leatherback) have been placed on the endangered species list and three others (green, loggerhead, and olive ridley) have been proposed for inclusion on the threatened species list. While this action may curb the decline of sea turtles, it does not insure a satisfactory environment for sea turtles to develop and maintain an equilibrium population. Such an environment can only come from proper conservation and management practices. The NMFS management plan has been formulate with long and short term achievable goals to conserve sea turtle populations and still increase present fish trawling efficiency. This approach should be compatible with the goals of federal, state and private groups and adhere to all laws, rules and regulations.

The ultimate goal of this plan is removal of sea turtles from endangered or threatened species lists. To accomplish this goal, it is necessary to establish and maintain some optimal population size, based on the carrying capacity of available habitat. The structure of such a recovery can be defined by examination of habitat and population models. Habitat and population specifications thus constitute the major areas in which suitable data bases must be obtained. Furthermore, since sea turtle populations are declining, particular attention must be directed to turtle mortalities and habitat alterations. Reduction of non-directed (incidental catch) mortality has been addressed by the institution of a trawl modification program.

The National Marine Turtle Management program is scheduled to last approximately ten years. Short term goals of assessment of non-directed mortality and prototype trawl development will be completed as soon as possible. Habitat and population modeling will begin the first year. Since most critical habitat and incidental catch areas are in the Southeast Region, the program will initially focus in this region.