



Fishery that threatens turtles poised to receive sustainability label

Eco-certification still being considered even as U.S. proposes to list loggerheads as endangered

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HALIFAX AND VANCOUVER – Northwest Atlantic loggerhead turtles are on the cusp of being listed as endangered in the United States – while a controversial Canadian fishery that kills hundreds of these turtles every year is poised to receive certification as a “sustainable” source of seafood.

Last week, federal agencies in the U.S. proposed to upgrade the status of Northwest Atlantic populations of loggerhead turtles from “threatened” to “endangered” under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. These turtles are considered to be in steep decline based on the numbers of females returning to nesting beaches along the U.S. eastern seaboard. Fisheries bycatch is the leading cause of the turtles’ steady decline, according to the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service.

“Listing loggerhead turtles as endangered is a critical step toward protecting them from extinction,” said Scott Wallace, sustainable fisheries analyst with the David Suzuki Foundation. “However, the U.S. proposal – and our chance to save these turtles – is being undermined by the operations of the Atlantic longline fishery here in Canada.”

The Canadian Atlantic longline fishery for swordfish and tuna catches about 1,200 Northwest Atlantic loggerhead turtles a year. Between 20 and 45 per cent of the turtles, which can live up to 100 years if unharmed, are likely to die, according to U.S. estimates.

Despite its serious impact on marine life, the longline fishery is being assessed for certification by the U.K.-based Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which runs a global eco-label program that enables fisheries to be branded as a sustainable source of seafood. Sustainable seafood is generally defined as species with healthy populations that are sourced from fisheries or aquaculture operations that don’t cause significant harm to other sea life and ocean ecosystems.

“When consumers purchase eco-labelled products, they assume they’re doing something good for the environment, not contributing to the extinction of a species,” said Beth Hunter, oceans coordinator for Greenpeace Canada. “Consumers, supermarkets and restaurants can help protect endangered turtles by avoiding products from the unsustainable longline fishery.”

Environmental groups including the David Suzuki Foundation, Greenpeace and the Ecology Action Centre are calling on the MSC to deny certification of the Atlantic longline swordfish fishery.

The groups point to the harpoon swordfish fishery – which was recommended for eco-certification by the MSC on Friday – as an example of how Canada’s impact on loggerhead turtle populations could be reduced simply by using more selective fishing gears. The government of Canada currently allocates only 10 per cent of Canada’s annual swordfish quota to the harpoon fishery.

“We fully support the certification of harpooned swordfish, as it is one of Canada’s most sustainable fisheries,” says Shannon Arnold of the Ecology Action Centre. “This is exactly the type of fishery that eco-labelling should recognize and help gain market share.”

Loggerhead turtles are currently unprotected in Canadian waters. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) – the scientific advisory group to the Species at Risk Act – will review the status of loggerhead turtles in Canadian waters at the end of April.

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NOAA Press release
http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2010/20100310_loggerhead.html