

Leatherback Turtles

Leatherback turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) are long lived and have a large geographic range.¹ Sightings of adult leatherback turtles in BC coastal waters typically peak between June and September, when they feed on soft-bodied invertebrates such as jellyfish. Little is understood about the spatial distribution of juveniles and young adults, however, and it remains unknown whether they also migrate as far north as BC.²

In 1980 there were an estimated 115,000 leatherback turtles worldwide, but in 1995 that number had declined to 34,500. In the Pacific, population estimates are unclear, but leatherbacks are believed to be facing imminent extinction in Pacific waters.¹ The North Pacific population of the leatherback turtle is listed as Endangered under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA)³ and by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada.⁴

Abundance and spatial distribution of leatherback turtles in BC waters are unclear as sighting reports remain few and distribution data on their prey species, primarily large jellyfish, are sparse.² Sightings of leatherback turtles within PNCIMA have increased in recent years, but this may be partially due to increased public awareness.^{1,5} It remains difficult to draw conclusions about possible significant areas for this species based on annual sightings.²

Important Area

Important Areas (IAs) were identified for leatherback turtles in 2006 through interviewing experts and considering relevant literature during the process of establishing Ecologically and Biologically Significant Areas (EBSAs) in PNCIMA.²

A large IA was recommended that includes areas where turtles have been repeatedly sighted.² The IA illustrated in



Leatherback turtle. Illustration: A. Denbigh

the accompanying map runs along the shelf break off the edge of the continental shelf, including waters from northern Vancouver Island to Langara Island on the northwest corner of Haida Gwaii.⁵ Turtles have also been sighted with less frequency in other locations within PNCIMA.²

Leatherback turtles are believed to face imminent extinction in the Pacific

1 Heise, K., Ford, J. and Olesiuk, P. 2007. Appendix J: Marine mammals and turtles. In Ecosystem overview: Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area (PNCIMA). Edited by Lucas, B.G., Verrin, S. and Brown, R. Can. Tech. Rep. Fish. Aquat. Sci. 2667: iv + 35 p. Material presented is drawn from the following literature reviews, which include primary references:
 2 Clarke, C.L. and Jamieson, G.S. 2006. Identification of ecologically and biologically significant areas in the Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area: Phase I – identification of important areas. Can. Tech. Rep. Fish. Aquat. Sci. 2678: vi + 89 p.
 3 The Species at Risk Act (SARA) was created to protect species under threat of extinction. Species are assessed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), then by the federal government, based upon scientific information and consultations, to determine whether those species get legal protection under SARA.
 4 COSEWIC. 2011. Wildlife species search. http://www.cosewic.gc.ca/eng/sct1/searchform_e.cfm (Accessed February 2011).
 5 Clarke, C.L. and Jamieson, G.S. 2006. Identification of ecologically and biologically significant areas in the Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area: Phase II – final report. Can. Tech. Rep. Fish. Aquat. Sci. 2686: v + 25 p.

