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## **U.N. General Assembly adopts resolution to benefit endangered turtles**

by Seana K. Magee  
NEW YORK, Nov. 29, 2005 KYODO

The General Assembly adopted a resolution Tuesday calling on countries to close fishing areas where large numbers of endangered turtles and other animals are killed or injured each year and to protect other marine species.

Of major concern to environmentalists is the future of the Pacific leatherback. The 100-million-year-old creature is on the brink of extinction within the next five to 30 years if current long-line fishing practices, which involve setting out hundreds of baited hooks on lines that extend up to 96 kilometers, are not scaled back.

The indiscriminate fishing method often catches much more than the intended tuna or swordfish and snags a host of other animals, referred to as bycatch, including the sea turtles, seals, sea birds, dolphins, sharks and whales.

Japan, Taiwan and South Korea are reportedly among the nations in the Pacific with the largest long-line fishing fleets and China is increasingly using the method for its catch.

In a portion of the resolution's 18-page text, states, regional and subregional fisheries management and other international organizations are urged to eliminate or reduce bycatch and to consider measures regarding "closed seasons and areas and zones reserved for selected fisheries."

Specifically, states and other related organizations are called on to implement guidelines to "reduce sea turtle mortality in fishing operations and the international plan of action for reducing incidental catch of seabirds in long-line fisheries" to prevent a further decline in their populations.

In addition to laying out guidelines related to the fisheries bycatch and discards

portion of the text, the resolution also addresses other issues ranging from combating illegal and unregulated fishing to fishing overcapacity. While environmentalists are pleased that the United Nations has taken the step they ultimately believe that a moratorium on the fishing method is necessary to ensure that the Pacific leatherback survives.

"I am happy they have taken the first step because the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step," James Spotila, chaired professor of Environmental Science at Drexel University told Kyodo News in a phone interview, referring to the move by the General Assembly.

"I think it is essential that we have a moratorium on long-line fishing because the leather back turtle is very near extinction in the Pacific Ocean," Spotila added.

As a scientist who has tracked the mortality rates of turtle populations he noted that there are only about 900 adult female Pacific leatherbacks remaining in the Eastern Pacific, primarily in Mexico and Costa Rica, and about 4,000 adult females in the western Pacific, which includes parts of Malaysia, Australia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and other Pacific Islands.

In 1980, there were approximately 70-90,000 adult female turtles in the eastern Pacific. As a significant nesting area in the Pacific, Malaysia now only has a couple of animals whereas there were more than 5,000 female decades ago.

Accordingly, scientific journals report that there has been a 95 percent decline of the population of female nesting leatherbacks since 1980.

While the conservationists are concerned with the plight of the turtles, long-line fishing proponents worry that if the method were eliminated altogether there would be an impact to the industry and a significant loss of jobs.

"To some degree you are playing roulette with the turtles," Spotila said. "If we are wrong about long-lining it causes an economic impact or it has a bad effect on an industry for five, or 10 or 20 years, but if we are right about it and we don't stop it, then you are talking about extinction of the animal."

In June dozens of schoolchildren dressed in turtle costumes rallied in front of the U.N. headquarters where they delivered a petition to Secretary General Kofi Annan that was signed by 1,007 scientists from 97 countries and 281 nongovernmental organizations urging that the fishing method be stopped. The protest coincided with an open-ended meeting at the United Nations on oceans and the law of the sea.

The language that endorsed a set of guidelines was drafted earlier by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization at the June meeting and urged countries to reduce interactions with the sea turtles and called for time and area closures to reduce the bycatch, which includes the endangered sea turtles.

"The descent of the leatherback toward extinction is a global ecological tragedy that affects us all. As goes the leatherback, so goes the ocean," warned Spotila when he testified in June before the United Nations.

A recent study in the scientific journal Ecology Letters estimates that some 50,000 leatherbacks and about 200,000 loggerheads, also a threatened species, are caught by long-lines annually.

Spotila is also worried about the future of the Pacific loggerheads. Japan has a total population of about 1,500 loggerheads with about half of them being females who nest. Also in the Pacific, Australia has an estimated total population of about 1,000 turtles, with approximately 500 of those being adult females.

Although the 191-member world body adopted the resolution by consensus, it is a nonbinding one.

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November 30, 2005\_06:22:15 

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