



## Sea Turtles Facing a Grim Future Unless Changes are Made

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Sea turtles have inhabited the Earth for over 100 million years. Now, as a result of harmful fishing practices, these gentle ocean dwellers may only have 10 years left. In addition, the fish being caught in these devastating nets contain high levels of methyl mercury, which is harmful to humans as well.

In order to protect our health and the future of the leatherback sea turtle, the Sea Turtle Restoration Project (STRP) is educating the public about sea turtles and mercury. In order to protect both consumers and turtles, the group is fighting for the enforcement of Proposition 65, a consumer right-to-know law passed in 1986 which requires California supermarkets and vendors to post warning signs about products that cause cancer or birth defects. This includes the several species of fish with high mercury contents.

Due to the testing of mercury-contaminated seafood by the STRP, California Attorney General Bill Lockyer sued state supermarkets for their failure to post the legally authorized warning signs. An STRP survey indicates that 70 percent of stores statewide, and 84 percent in Marin County, have either no signs or inadequate signs in the fresh and frozen sections.

The STRP hopes that by alerting the public with these signs about the dangers of eating high methyl mercury content fish, the demand will be reduced and ultimately a fishing effort to protect sea turtles, seabirds, marine mammals and other non-target marine life will be mobilized.

Sea turtles are often swept up in nets with tuna, swordfish, shark, tilefish and king mackerel, all of which contain a high methyl mercury level. Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that can cause nervous system and brain damage in developing fetuses, infants and young children.

Exploitation of ocean resources and destructive industrial fishing technology has created severe and irreversible effects on the sea turtle population. When long line fishing occurs in areas where sea turtles migrate with tuna and other targeted fish, they become subject to prey as well.

"Six out of the seven species of sea turtles are endangered or threatened. The primary reason is from industrial fishing in which they get caught on the hooks trying to eat the bait," said Dr. Robert Overtz, a marine species campaigner for the STRP. "Or they're caught by accident, which is the case with the leatherback sea turtle."

Worldwide, the leatherback sea turtle population faces the largest threat of extinction since suffering a 95 percent decline in 1980, and now nesting females number only 3,000 – down from 80,000 in the 1990s. The leatherback is only one of the six endangered sea turtle species. Overtz

feels the turtle is a striking example of the carelessness of human actions. STRP is committed to preventing further devastation to sea turtles and ocean ecosystems.

"Sea turtles are really an indicator of the state of the health of our oceans, and how we treat our oceans, and we're seeing a dramatic decline in their survival," said Dr. Overtz. "Primarily because we've intensified our effort to exploit the ocean and, as our world population grows, there's an increasing demand for seafood to supplement other sources of protein."

Mercury contamination of seafood is a persistent public health concern. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration warns pregnant women as well as children to avoid eating swordfish, shark, tilefish and king mackerel because of their high methyl mercury content.

Low-level mercury poisoning from eating mercury-contaminated seafood can include hair loss, memory loss, mental instability, numbness or burning in extremities, learning disabilities, central nervous system damage, reduced motor skills and psychological effects, including depression.

In Marin County, Whole Foods and Safeway are among those abiding by the law to post the mercury warning sign. However, besides complying with the law, Whole Foods has offered handouts to concerned customers, further educating them about the foods they are putting into their bodies. According to Whole Foods and Safeway, the signs are not having an impact on fish sales at their stores.

According to Andy Perri, a marine species campaigner for STRP, the fishing industry is more concerned with economic gain than the health of the public and marine ecosystems.

The bait on long-line fishing hooks sometimes tempts sea turtles. In turn, they get caught, and then drown. By the time the lines are pulled up, they are already dead. Destruction of habitat, the poaching of their eggs and the negligence to protect our marine resources are factors leading to extinction of their population as well.

Dr. Overtz identifies the problem as under-recognition of the importance of ocean resources.

"There are six main countries that use long-line fishing in the Pacific that are the most destructive," he said, in reference to the United States, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Chile, and Spain. "Each of these countries has very large industrial long-line fishing fleets and is causing the largest threat to our survival."

There will always be a call for help somewhere and Dr. Overtz found his call from the ocean. As a marine species campaigner, his passion is aimed at protecting the livelihood of the leatherback sea turtle.

"I have a very strong spiritual connection with the oceans and I've always had a very strong connection with turtles," he said. "The majesty of the way they move and their sense of time and how they walk lightly on the earth has always been something that's really inspired me."

## RESOURCES:

To learn more about sea turtles and choices for healthy oceans, check out:

- Sea Turtle Restoration Project: [www.seaturtles.org](http://www.seaturtles.org)
- Turtle Island's Gotmercury.org: [www.gotmercury.org](http://www.gotmercury.org)
- Monterey Bay Aquarium: [www.montereybayaquarium.org](http://www.montereybayaquarium.org)