

People around the world should be striving to preserve a healthy environment for both humans and animals. However, factors such as pollution, climate change and exploitation are causing an increase in endangered species around the world. All eight species of sea turtles in the world are classified as either endangered or threatened. One species of sea turtles that is currently classified as critically endangered is the leatherback turtle. "The leatherback is the largest sea turtle as it can grow to about six and a half feet long and weigh as much as 1,400 pounds" (Bageera). Leatherback sea turtles are capable of diving the deepest, and traveling the farthest of all the species of sea turtles. These sea turtles can also be identified from their cousins because they are the only sea turtles without hard scales covering their shells. Leatherbacks get their name from their leathery, skin-like shells. They also differentiate from their cousins in that they mostly eat jellyfish. They also eat other kinds of aquatic creatures such as mollusks, squid and fish in general. Leatherback turtles are also the only species of sea turtle that can survive in cold water. They are able to survive by shutting off the blood flow to their flippers and because of a layer of fat under their skin that keeps their body temperature above the temperature of the water. While male leatherbacks almost never leave the water after crawling in at birth, female leatherbacks lay their eggs on sandy beaches all over the world. They have been known to travel as far north as Alaska and as far south as South Africa to lay their eggs. Females nest repeatedly during mating season, which occurs annually. However, female turtles are known to wait a few years after nesting before returning to mate. Female leatherback turtles return to the beach where they were born to lay their eggs, and after digging and laying the eggs in a hole the females cover it with sand to disguise it from predators and go back into the water.

A female sea turtle lays over a hundred eggs as a defense against the many predators and dangers that threaten the hatching and growth of sea turtles. However, threats involving human activity are causing the amount of leatherback turtles to drastically decrease. Many females are deterred from nesting at their natal beaches, because of the noise and light caused by the presence of humans and manmade

objects such as buildings, beach furniture and lights. This forces the female turtles to nest at less than ideal beaches, where there are more obstacles and predators to hinder the success of the newly hatched sea turtles. Also, human harvesting of sea turtle eggs is quite common, which keeps leatherbacks from being able to stabilize their population size. Even though not all nests are harvested, many newly hatched sea turtles get disoriented by beach lights, run over by cars or eaten by predators such as raccoons, pigs or dogs, before even getting into the water. One solution to these issues is the protection and preservation of popular nesting beaches from having eggs harvested, beach driving and other human activities. An example of this is the “Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge’s efforts in purchasing over twenty miles of sandy beach between Melbourne and Wabasso” (Sea Turtle Conservancy). While this is mainly a nesting site for loggerhead and green sea turtles, leatherback sea turtles have been known to nest on this stretch of beach as well. After purchasing this land the organization would protect it from being disturbed by humans.

Once sea turtles have survived their vulnerable years as a baby turtle, “they are not preyed upon except for the occasional shark attack” (Sea Turtle Conservancy). However, there are still human threats that cause the leatherback sea turtles to die too quickly. The selling of turtle shells and jewellery illegally is a factor that contributes to the decline of the leatherback population. Also, every year tens of thousands of leatherbacks are killed by the fishing industry with equipment like gill nets, shrimp trawls and longlines. “Leatherback turtles are also attracted to the glowing bait on the ends of longline hooks, because of their resemblance to jellyfish” (Sea Turtle Conservancy). A solution in preventing the drowning of leatherbacks that are caught in shrimp trawls is the implementation of Turtle Excluder Devices or TEDs in all shrimp trawls. TEDs are trapdoors found on the top or bottom of shrimp trawls. Therefore, while shrimp are caught in the bag-like section of the trawl, sea turtles and sharks can escape through the TEDs. This could prevent thousands of sea turtles from drowning.

Pollution is another factor caused by humans that is contributing to the rapid decline of leatherback turtles. "Many leatherbacks swallow plastic bags, balloons and other pieces of plastic floating around in the water after mistaking them for jellyfish" (Sea Turtle Conservancy). Many sea turtles also become entangled in floating debris, and then drown when they cannot return to the surface for air. "A disease that is killing sea turtles called Fibropapillomas is thought to be caused by pollution such as oil spills and fertilizers" (Sea Turtle Conservancy). This is another example of how pollution is negatively affecting the leatherback sea turtles. If pollution affects sea turtles to such a degree, then it would seem reasonable to think that pollution would negatively affect humans as well.

"The leatherback sea turtle is not easily kept in captivity" (Bageera). This is because leatherbacks do not have the ability to swim backwards, meaning that if they are in a glass aquarium and they hit one side of the aquarium, they will continue swimming into the wall. This means that trying to capture and breed leatherbacks in captivity would not be ideal in increasing the number of the sea turtle species. However, there are still other solutions that can be found. National and international laws can ensure that the protection of the leatherback sea turtle is enforced, whether it involves the banning of importing/exporting turtle products, making hurting or bothering sea turtles illegal or even simply eliminating beach lighting.

Another way to promote the preservation of leatherback sea turtles is to have some environmentalists approach big corporations with ways to market the protection of sea turtles. One such corporation could be Disney, because Disney has been supporting environmental causes in many different areas, from promoting recycling to the creation of the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund. In Disneyworld, Florida's Epcot, there is a show called Turtle Talk with Crush. In order to promote the saving of leatherback sea turtles, before the show starts and the people are waiting, Disney could play a promotional video on the causes of the decline of leatherback turtles and ways to stop this decline. In

the video they could show footage of leatherback turtles, which would make the message more real for the viewers. Also, certain toys of leatherback turtles could be sold at the nearby shop, and a percentage of the money used to purchase each toy would be donated for the protection of the leatherback. There could also be information available in the shop on how to adopt a sea turtle and of other organizations involved in helping leatherbacks where people could donate. Also, Disney could celebrate a Save the Turtles Day once a year at its theme parks, online and on the Disney channel. That day they could make the leatherback toys available, not just at the Turtle Talk with Crush gift shop, but in the other stores at the different parks. On the Disney website there could be information about Save the Turtles Day as well as links to different sites about the leatherback. On the Disney Channel, during the commercials there could be an infomercial about Save the Turtles Day and different organizations where money can be donated to help save leatherback sea turtles. With a corporation like Disney involved in the marketing and educating of its massive audience about the threats affecting the leatherback, it will help in obtaining the attention needed to make a difference for the leatherback sea turtles, as well as the other species of sea turtles around the world.

Educating the masses on the threats facing leatherback sea turtles and ways to eradicate these threats is an important solution in itself. The more people know about the issues surrounding this endangered species, the more attention these issues will receive and the more people will be willing to get involved to aid the leatherback sea turtle from fading into extinction. Not only would the extinction of these turtles drastically affect the marine food chain, but the world would lose the presence and beauty of a magnificent underwater creature. Raising awareness in order to promote change is an effective way for people to help restore the leatherback sea turtle. With every species kept from extinction, we improve our own lives as well.

Citations

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