

our environment

Sea Turtles in Trouble?

Three more species of sea turtles have been pushed closer to extinction because of increased development of coastal shorelines and overuse for commercial purposes.

The green (*Chelonia mydas*), loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), and Pacific ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) sea turtles have been proposed in the *Federal Register* to be added to the U.S. List of Threatened Wildlife by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, and the National Marine Fisheries Service, Department of Commerce. The proposal came after a joint status review by both agencies found seriously decreased populations of these species throughout the world. The leatherback, hawksbill, and Atlantic ridley sea turtles are already on the U.S. List of Endangered Wildlife.

cial taking of turtles and eggs. The lack of restrictions on importing turtle products into this country may be encouraging this exploitation.

If adopted, the new regulations would prohibit the taking, import, and export of the species and would halt the United States involvement in the sale in interstate the foreign commerce of these turtles and products made from them.

There would be certain exceptions to the prohibitions. Sea turtles could be taken by permit for scientific purposes, enhancement of propagation, or survival. The incidental catch of sea turtles during fishing or research activities would be exempted provided that the turtles were immediately returned to the sea and that the fishing was not taking place in an area of substantial breeding and feeding by these species. Permits would be authorized for mariculture operations (scientific breeding and raising of sea creatures for commercial use) for two years if there is a showing of significant progress toward a goal of creating a captive breeding population that is completely self-sustaining and independent of wild stocks. After two years permits would be available only if turtles were taken from captive bred populations completely self-sustaining and independent of wild stocks. Certain live specimens and products held on the date of the regulatory proposal would be exempted from the prohibition.

The prohibition on interstate commerce would not take effect until one year after the regulations become effective, thereby allowing owners to distribute inventory lawfully possessed. Permits would also be available for economic hardship.

kite to as much of its former range as possible, after drawing up a detailed plan which will schedule specific actions needed.

The Everglade kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeus*) is a predatory bird, similar to a marsh hawk, and related to the falcon. It is one of several kinds of snail kites that occur in Central and South America. At one time the Florida Everglade, or snail, kite was distributed throughout peninsular Florida in freshwater marshes. At present it is restricted primarily to southeastern Florida and is thought to number less than 100 individuals.

The original population was severely reduced because of destruction of habitat and shooting. Drainage of marshes for agricultural and residential use continues to be a major factor in the decline of this bird. These problems plus drought and fire have reduced populations of the large apple snail (*Pomacea paludosa*) on which the kite depends for food. The major threat to the remaining kite population involves maintenance of proper water levels in its habitat for snail production and maintenance of nesting cover. In recent years the flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades has been reduced by drought and diversion to agricultural areas.

Some constructive steps have been taken to assist the kite. Educational programs by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Audubon Society are intended to discourage indiscriminate shooting and publicize the plight of the kite. Numerous signs depicting this bird dot the marshes of southern Florida. Sanctuaries and known nesting areas are regularly patrolled. Portions of the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge where kites nest are closed to entry during the nesting season.

Research is also underway in the field and at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center to ascertain the status of the kite, to determine conservation methods, and to develop techniques for increasing production of apple snails. South American snail kites, one of four subspecies of Everglade kite, are being reared at Patuxent to develop information on snail kite habitat requirements.

Federal-State Aid for Everglades Kite

The Florida Everglade kite's chances for survival in Florida have been enhanced by the establishment of a cooperative federal-state team of experts who will give priority to restoring the populations of this hawk.

The team's primary objective is to coordinate actions to restore the Everglade

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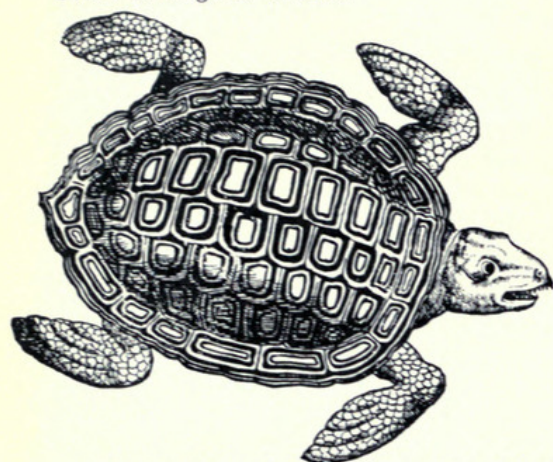
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Sea turtles, which can grow to 1,500 pounds, rarely come on land except to lay eggs. Human development of coastal areas for industry and tourism has destroyed many of these nesting sites. Along some shorelines, bright city and highway lights confuse hatchlings and attract them inland where they die.

The green sea turtle is probably the most commercially valuable reptile in the world and one of the most heavily hunted. Its meat, eggs, and calipee (cartilage used in soup) have been eaten for centuries, its skin has been used for leather, its shell has been used for jewelry, and its oil has been used in the cosmetics industry. An international market in turtle products now exists, with the United States being among the largest consumers.

In the last few years there has been a rise in the commercial take of the Pacific ridley, stimulated by the development of a market for a turtle leather, partly as a substitute for alligator hides.

Both the green and loggerhead are found around the world, with some populations nesting on various shores and coastal islands in the southeastern United States and its territories and possessions. The Pacific ridley also nests in many parts of the world, but is not known to nest in the continental United States.

Although most states where the turtles are found protect the reptiles, other countries either permit or cannot prevent the commer-



1975. "Federal State Aid for Everglades Kite." *Field Museum of Natural History bulletin* 46(8), 12–12.

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