

HSUS Fights to Keep Turtles Out of Soup



HSUS Staff Photo

Economic interests working through the U. S. Dept. of Commerce are seeking to block a Dept. of Interior proposal to put sea turtles on the endangered species list in order to continue exploiting them for their meat and hides.

HSUS has joined other animal welfare and conservation organizations in supporting Interior's plan to declare the loggerhead, Pacific ridley, and green sea turtles endangered and, thereby, protect them from all types of commercial exploitation, including the incidental taking of sea turtles by shrimp fishermen.

While Interior has authority to determine what species will be listed as endangered, responsibility for all sea life is shared jointly by Interior and Commerce.

One of the economic interests that stands to lose money if sea turtles are protected is Mariculture, Ltd., which collects thousands of sea turtle eggs annually from the beaches of Dutch Surinam and hatches them at its turtle farm on the British Island of Grand Cayman. With export of turtle meat as its objective, Mariculture claims it will have enough turtles reproducing in captivity by 1980 to replace the need to take turtles out of the wild. Many zoologists consider this projection unrealistic.

HSUS wildlife expert Sue Pressman, representing Monitor, a consortium of

animal welfare and conservation organizations, inspected the Grand Cayman turtle farm in March to gather information on the operation. She concluded that Mariculture has not yet succeeded in getting a substantial number of turtles to reproduce and, consequently, agrees that the 1980 projection is unrealistically optimistic.

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Because sea turtles must be approximately 11 years old before they can reproduce, it is a long process to establish enough breeding pairs in captivity to replace the need for taking eggs out of the wild.

“It's not like this operation was necessary to provide protein to the starving people of the world,” Mrs. Pressman said. “Turtle meat is a delicacy that very few people indulge in. Why should the worldwide population of any species be jeopardized solely for the taste and profits of a few people?”

HSUS is also concerned that the success of Mariculture's operation could

make turtle meat popular and, therefore, a highly prized target for poachers. “Nothing can spell the end for an animal faster than to have it become the source of black market operation,” Mrs. Pressman said.

F. Wayne King, Ph.D., director of zoology and conservation for the New York Zoological Society, on behalf of Monitor, urged the federal government at a March hearing to keep sea turtles on the endangered list. King expressed fear that the Mariculture operation, coupled with other consumer uses of sea turtle products and the incidental taking of sea turtles by shrimp fishermen, would seriously threaten the worldwide sea turtle population. He also urged that sole responsibility for the status of sea turtles be given the Dept. of the Interior, instead of being shared jointly by Interior and the Dept. of Commerce as it is now.

In a statement before the same hearing, Dr. Archie Carr, zoology professor at the University of Florida and one of the leading authorities on sea turtles, expressed fear that vested commercial interests are threatening the future of the turtles in question. “For our government to drag its feet in the effort to save them or to accede to action that leaves loopholes for further exploitation of any kind whatever would be anachronistic and shameful,” he said.