NEWS AND UPDATES

This section is compiled by Sudarshan Rodriguez, Coordinator of WAVES, a weekly marine and coastal E-news compilation.

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Endangered turtles swim in Pacific "race"

San Jose, Costa Rica (Reuters): Eleven leatherback turtles are swimming across the Pacific Ocean to the Galapagos Islands in a "race" that will be tracked online to draw attention to the plight of the endangered creatures.

The turtles have been tagged with satellite communication devices that give their positions as they head south from their nesting sites on Costa Rica's Playa Grande beach to feeding grounds near the Galapagos, about 950 miles away.

Online participants can choose a turtle and track its course at http://www.greatturtlerace.com from April 16 with the winner being the animal that travels furthest in two weeks of swimming.

There is no prize for the winner of the race, aimed at highlighting the dangers facing a creature that has graced the oceans for 100 million years.

"It's fascinating to consider that we are able to bring together these prehistoric animals with such cutting-edge science," said Stanford University researcher George Shillinger, one of the race organisers.

Environmentalists say 95 per cent of leatherbacks in the Pacific Ocean have vanished in the last 20 years due to human activity like fishing, poaching of their eggs and building near their nests, and they could become extinct in the next decade.

Thousands of leatherbacks nested at Playa Grande 10 years ago but the number has dropped to below 100 in the last five years.

Leatherbacks, which can reach a shell length of 1.7 metres (5.6 feet) and a mass of 700 kg (1,540 lb), often die after being entangled in fishing lines and nets. Others choke on plastic bags, wrongly believing they are jellyfish, which are a delicacy for turtles.

The Galapagos Islands, which lie west of Ecuador, are home to hundreds of unique species, including giant tortoises, exotic birds and iguanas. The variety of natural life there inspired 19th century British naturalist Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection.

The leatherback race will not be live because the turtles left Costa Rica at different times. Instead, environmentalist group Conservation International will provide a day-to-day showing of the first 14 days of their journeys simultaneously as if they were racing.

The event will raise funds to protect Playa Grande. It is being organized by Conservation International, Costa Rica's Environment Ministry, the Leatherback Trust and the Tagging of Pacific Predators programme.

Source: http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?alias= endangered-turtles-swim-p&chanID=sa003& modsrc = reuters

PTTs glued to seven olive ridleys
Staff Reporter

Behrampur: Platform Terminal Transmitters (PTT) were glued to seven olive ridley turtles in mid sea near Rushikulya rookery coast by wildlife experts.

According to Berhampur Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) S.N. Mahapatra, this has been done because olive ridleys are not venturing to the coast for mass

nesting this year. But they can still be seen in sea a few km from the coast. Usually, the PTTs that can be tracked by satellites are fixed to turtles when they come over to the coast to nest. Mr. Mahapatra says the PTTs may unravel the reasons for which olive ridleys are not coming to their preferred nesting zones on the Orissa coast. There has been only one mass-nesting spell at Gahiramatha. But the Devi rookery and the Rushikulya rookery coasts are yet to experience mass nesting.

Forest officials still have hopes that the turtles would come and nest till April as they are at sea near the coast. In the past, mass nesting had been seen in April also.

This year, over 70 PTTs are being glued to olive ridleys near the Orissa coast under a research project of New Zealand-based SIRTRACK, wildlife trafficking experts. Each PTT costs about $2,000.

Wild Life Institute of India and the State Forest Department are involved in this research project. The information received from these modern communication devices would unravel the unknown facets of their lives, especially during their nesting period.

It would also hint at the protection and management efforts needed at shore and sea for the olive ridleys coming to Orissa coast to nest, said Mr. Mahapatra. These endangered turtles are highly vulnerable as some studies say that one out of 1,000 hatchlings of olive ridleys survive to reach adulthood.

Source: http://www.hindu.com/2007/03/19/stories/2007031906410500.htm

Ocean Fisheries Maxed Out
By Stephen Leahy

Brooklin, Canada, Mar 5 (IPS) Two-thirds of fish stocks in the world's high seas are overfished, while most of those closer to shore are failing or fished to the maximum, a new U.N. report said Monday.

More and stronger regional fisheries management organisations are needed to rebuild depleted stocks and prevent the collapse of other stocks, warned the FAO's latest "State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture" (SOFIA) report.

Ocean fisheries have "most likely" reached their zenith, said FAO Assistant Director-General for Fisheries Ichiro Nomura.

In fact, that peak may have been reached some time ago. The annual world fish catch since the late 1980s has been stalled at between 85 million and 95 million tonnes. The SOFIA 2006 report records marine fisheries catch at 85.8 millions tonnes and notes that 25 per cent of marine stocks are overexploited or depleted while 52 per cent are "fully exploited".

In the open ocean, where the deep-sea trawlers roam unrestricted, stocks of hakes, Atlantic cod, halibut, orange roughy, bluefin tuna and sharks are all in deep trouble. "They (open ocean species) are key indicators of the state of a massive piece of the ocean ecosystem," said Nomura in a statement.

In recent years, numerous scientific studies of the oceans have clearly indicated they are in trouble. A major study published last fall in Science magazine projected that every commercial fishery in the world will be wiped out before 2050 and that the oceans may never recover without significant reform of the fisheries industry.

A month later, U.N. talks failed to establish a moratorium on deep-sea bottom trawling, widely acknowledged as wasteful and damaging to ocean bottom ecosystems.

In February, researchers at the University of British Columbia in Canada calculated that these trawlers receive 152 million dollars a year in fuel and other subsidies. Without these subsidies, the few hundred ships that make up the global deep-sea trawler fleet would actually lose millions of dollars a year, said Rashid Sumaila, a researcher at the University of British Columbia. Japan, South Korea, Spain, Australia and Russia are the five largest payers of such subsidies, Sumaila said in an interview.
"These subsidies pay the deep-sea trawlers to do something appalling and something they'd never do on their own because it’s uneconomic," said

Elliott Norse, president of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute, a scientific environmental group in the U.S. state of Washington.

"It's an example of unintended consequences of some government policies," Norse told IPS. But it is something that governments need to fix and fast, he added.

Also in need of fast repair are the world's 39 multilateral regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs), he said.

RFMOs are the fisheries managers in charge of most of world's fish stocks outside of the unregulated high seas. Despite the FAO's strong support and hopes of expanding RFMOs everywhere, the SOFIA report notes that some of the most depleted fisheries such as the Northeast Atlantic and Southeast Atlantic have been run by RFMOs for many years.

Countries often opt out of an RFMO if they want to catch more fish than their allocation, says Daniel Pauly, a professor and director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia.

Small countries like those in the Caribbean region can't afford RFMO membership fees, so the catch quotas in the waters around their countries are decided by global fishing nations like Japan and Taiwan, Pauly told IPS.

Despite his reservations, "We need strong RFMOs and to have them protect the high seas," he said.

"Local countries should automatically be members and not have to pay membership fees. And if the science says ‘no more fishing', then countries cannot opt out," Pauly said. Currently, politics trumps science in most decisions about fish stocks, he noted.

For that to change, the mandate for RFMOs must switch from management of fish stocks for maximum exploitation to protection of the stocks and the ecosystem.
"The primary mission of RFMOs should be to prevent fisheries from wrecking the marine ecosystem," Pauly told IPS.

A global network of off-limits marine preserves is equally important. Currently less than 0.6 percent of the oceans is in reserves and much less than that is fully protected from fishing, says Pauly.

Nearly all countries have agreed at international meetings, such as 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and at the Convention on Biodiversity, to create a global network of marine protected areas (MPAs) by 2012. Experts suggest 30 to 50 per cent of the oceans may need to be off-limits to fishing if the oceans are to recover.

While most countries already protect 10 to 12 per cent of their land in parks and reserves, only the United States has actually made major additions to its MPAs, such as last year's creation of the world's largest reserve off Hawaii.

A global fisheries institution that uses science to determine how many fish, of what kind and where can be caught on a sustainable basis without harming the marine ecosystem, which that would also be good for fishers and their communities, would be the ideal solution, says Norse.

"Maybe that should be the FAO's job instead of producing more statistical reports," he commented. "We don't have time for more fruitless discussion."

Pauly is also impatient. "Our institutions are not responding fast enough to the industrial might and scale of change that is happening," he said. "The rate are which our institutions take action is simply too slow."

Source: http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=36811