



Marine Conservation Society

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PRESS RELEASE

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UK TO INVESTIGATE MARINE TURTLE EXPLOITATION IN THE OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

London, 15th November 2001. A ground-breaking project to investigate the exploitation of endangered¹ marine turtle populations in the Caribbean UK Overseas Territories is launched today by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the University of Wales and the Marine Conservation Society (MCS).

The 3-year, DEFRA-funded project is spearheaded by the University's Marine Turtle Research Group² in association with the MCS³. The project will involve a coalition of organisations⁴ and will focus on turtles found in the UK Overseas Territories of Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Montserrat and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

"This is the first time that significant funding has been made available to research the marine turtle populations found in the Caribbean UK Overseas Territories" said Environment Minister Michael Meacher, *"This initiative shows the Government's commitment to fulfill its responsibility towards the global conservation of critically endangered species"*.

Four species of marine turtle regularly nest on the beaches or feed in the waters of the Caribbean UK Overseas Territories, including the critically endangered hawksbill turtle and the endangered green turtle. For centuries the hawksbill has been hunted in the Caribbean for its beautiful shell, used to make 'tortoiseshell', while Caribbean populations of the green turtle were decimated to supply Europe's insatiable appetite for turtle soup.

Despite a ban on all international trade in marine turtle products under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1977, tortoiseshell items continue to be illegally traded in the Caribbean, where unsuspecting tourists provide the main market while four Territories still allow legal, subsistence-level turtle harvests⁵.

The project team aim to work with local expertise and help establish long-term research programmes in each Territory. Through exhaustive field research and genetic stock analysis the team will assess the status of the marine turtle populations at nesting beaches and foraging grounds while evaluating legal and illegal turtle harvests through socio-economic surveys.

“Through this project we aim to understand the local, cultural and economic importance of turtle harvests in the Overseas Territories and begin to assess their impact on regional turtle populations” said Dr Brendan Godley of the Marine Turtle Research Group, “In three years time we hope to be in a position to make recommendations for the conservation and management of the Caribbean turtle populations”.

DEFRA allocated funding for this research in recognition of the need for regional, cooperative management of Caribbean hawksbill populations after Cuba’s proposal to reopen international trade in hawksbills turtles was rejected at a CITES meeting last year.

“Little is known about the marine turtle populations inhabiting the UK Overseas Territories, but we do know that some populations are close to extinction” said Peter Richardson, MCS Species Policy Officer “These populations won’t recover overnight, in fact it takes years to implement effective, long-term recovery programmes. But this UK initiative is a very welcome first step towards a brighter future for turtles in the Caribbean UK Overseas Territories”. Ends

Editor’s notes:

- 1) The World Conservation Union (IUCN) recognizes seven species of marine turtle. The four species regularly found in Caribbean UK Overseas Territories are the hawksbill, green, leatherback and loggerhead turtles. IUCN list the hawksbill and leatherback turtles as critically endangered, whereas the green and loggerhead turtles are listed as endangered.
- 2) **The Marine Turtle Research Group (MTRG)**<www.seaturtle.org/mtrg>, University of Wales Swansea carries out research and conservation projects regarding turtles in UK waters, Mediterranean and the British Overseas Territories including Cayman Islands and Ascension Island. MTRG staff edit the international Marine Turtle Newsletter <www.seaturtle.org/mtn>.
- 3) The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) is the UK Charity dedicated to the protection of the marine environment and its wildlife. Since its formation in 1983 MCS has become a recognised authority on marine and coastal conservation and is regularly consulted by Government for its views on a range of marine issues including fishing. MCS provides information and guidance on many aspects of marine conservation and produces the annual *Good Beach Guide*, as well as promoting public participation in volunteer projects and surveys such as *Adopt-a-Beach*, *Seasearch* and *Basking Shark Watch*. MCS is currently joint lead partner on the Marine Turtle Grouped Species Action Plan for UK waters and the UK Overseas Territories.
- 4) This DEFRA-funded project will be led by the Marine Turtle Research Group and Marine Conservation Society and will involve collaborative work with the Cayman Island Department of Environment, the Cayman Turtle Farm, the University of Western Ontario, the University of Wales, Cardiff and US leatherback turtle expert Dr. Peter Dutton.
- 5) Regulated turtle fisheries are currently allowed in the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat and the Turks and Caicos Islands, while Anguilla has declared a five-year moratorium on turtle hunting. Marine turtles are completely protected in Bermuda.

For further information and photographs please contact:

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