

Sea Turtles International Student Activity

Directions: As you are reading the following article, consider the laws and provisions put in place to protect the Kemp's Ridleys. Upon the conclusion of this activity you will be asked to propose your own long term strategy for their restoration. Your proposed plan may include many of the laws and programs already in place or you may ditch the current plan completely and create one that is totally your own.

The boundaries that exist between countries are often more political in nature than actual barriers and allow for the free movement of people and wildlife. Nations and their governments throughout the world vary on how they perceive the protection of wildlife and their habitats. The politics are based on the country's economics and culture. For instance, a developed country may be secure enough economically to be able to afford banning the sale of property that would harm wildlife habitat. Developing countries often do not have this luxury. Those countries need to use all of the natural resources within their boundaries to sustain themselves economically. Even if a country has entered international agreements to protect wildlife and habitat, it may not have the funds to enforce those agreements, and its citizens may feel that the financial gain is worth the risk of breaking the law. Additionally, in some countries, land ownership includes the wildlife found on the land. Therefore, even if laws exist to protect wildlife and the habitat, private landowners are exempt.

With respect to culture, the people of some countries have used wildlife products for many centuries as part of their lifestyle and customs. Cultures may use ground shells to treat arthritis, gall bladders to treat disease, or ground horns to improve fertility. People from such countries may have been eating rare animal parts as delicacies for generations. Wildlife products are often an integral part of cultural celebrations and ceremonies. As a result, countries may be reluctant to join international agreements banning the possession of animal products. Where usage is restricted, citizens may resort to obtaining the product illegally.

The sale of wildlife products has caused a decline in many populations of animals throughout the world. In the 1970s, four conventions were held among nations to protect certain migratory species: (1) the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals, (2) the World Heritage Convention, (3) the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat, and (4) the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). CITES was adopted on July 1, 1975, and currently has 146 member countries. Those countries have agreed to ban commercial, international trade of listed endangered species and require a license for trading threatened species as a way of monitoring those that may become endangered. While most countries have joined CITES and have ratified those agreements found within, not all comply stringently, as enforcement is decided by the individual country.

All species of sea turtles are either listed as endangered or threatened and are covered by CITES. The Kemp's Ridley sea turtle is considered the most

endangered of all turtle species. Although the Kemp's Ridley population has significantly declined from its original numbers, they are still being captured for their value and ties to cultural traditions. Kemp's Ridleys are found in the Gulf of Mexico and migrate primarily between the US and Mexico. Besides being harvested, sea turtle populations are being threatened by pollution and habitat loss. The turtles' nesting grounds, found on ocean beaches are also declining because of development. Another threat to the turtle populations is the lights from homes and businesses along beach areas. After they hatch, baby sea turtles instinctively go toward the light, which is usually moonlight over water. When sea turtle eggs hatch near developed areas, the lights of homes and businesses confuse the baby sea turtles and cause them to head inland instead of out to the ocean. Anglers catch sea turtles in their nets or cages. Turtle hunters around the world harvest sea turtles either legally or illegally to sell their shells, meat, or body parts to international traders. In some countries sea turtle eggs are a delicacy and can be found on the open market.

Article adapted from:

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