

Safeguarding Sea Turtles: The Indispensable Role of the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (IAC)

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STETSON LAW

Prepared for the Secretariat and the Parties of the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (IAC).

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Technical Document

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Prepared by the Institute for Biodiversity Law and Policy at Stetson University College of Law and the Secretariat of the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (2025-2026).

Executive Summary

The Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (IAC) is the only binding international agreement focused solely on sea turtle conservation in the Western Hemisphere. With 16 active Parties, it plays a critical role in aligning national policies, safeguarding habitats, reducing bycatch, and advancing scientific collaboration. Despite a modest budget, the IAC has achieved measurable conservation outcomes. Sustained financial support from the Parties is crucial to maintaining and building on these successes. As nations pursue cost-effective ways to meet global biodiversity goals, the IAC offers a proven, collaborative model that delivers results with limited resources.

Why Sea Turtles Need International Protection

Sea turtles are ancient mariners that have inhabited Earth's oceans for over 100 million years. Today, five of six species found in the Western Hemisphere are classified as vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered by the IUCN. These migratory reptiles face a wide array of threats across their life cycle, including:

- **Bycatch in fisheries**, where turtles are unintentionally caught in trawl nets, longlines, and gillnets
- **Habitat loss** due to coastal development, beach erosion, and artificial lighting
- **Poaching and illegal trade** of turtle meat, eggs, and shell
- **Pollution**, particularly plastic waste and oil spills
- **Climate change**, which affects sex ratios, nesting success, and beach viability

Because sea turtles migrate thousands of kilometers between nesting beaches and foraging grounds, conservation efforts in one country can be undone by harm or lack of similar efforts occurring in another. For example, a leatherback tagged at a nesting beach in Costa Rica may forage off the coast of Ecuador or Chile and be incidentally caught in fisheries off Peru or Chile. No single nation can protect these species on its own.

An international treaty is therefore essential to coordinate actions, strengthen regional scientific research, establish shared standards, and facilitate data sharing and mutual accountability to follow up with the implementation of Resolutions adopted by Parties. The IAC fills this role by enabling countries across the Americas to collaborate on the conservation of these ecologically, culturally, and economically important marine species.

Background and Overview of the IAC

Established in 2001, the IAC provides a legal and institutional framework for countries in the Americas to collaborate on the protection and recovery of six species of sea turtles. The Convention obligates Parties to safeguard nesting and foraging habitats, reduce incidental capture in fisheries, regulate the use of sea turtles and their products, and promote scientific research and public education.

The IAC operates through four key institutional bodies:

- **The Conference of the Parties (COP)** is the Convention's decision-making body. It meets biennially to adopt resolutions, review implementation, and approve the budget and work plan.
- **The Secretariat** serves as the administrative hub of the Convention. It coordinates communication between Parties, organizes meetings of the subsidiary bodies, prepares reports of the annual meetings, facilitates compliance with the Convention work plan and cooperation among the Parties and promotes collaboration with other International Organizations through negotiation of Memorandum of Understanding.
- **The Scientific Committee** is composed of expert scientists from each Party. It reviews national data from the Parties' Annual Reports, provides technical guidance, and formulates science-based recommendations for policy decisions.
- **The Consultative Committee of Experts** is composed of managers and experts from the IAC member countries and includes government, representatives from the scientific community, NGO and private/ productive sector who offer strategic and policy recommendations based on data provided by the Scientific Committee to strengthen IAC implementation and align national actions with international conservation goals.

The Convention emphasizes collaborative, science-based conservation, and its structure ensures that technical expertise informs policy and that Parties remain accountable through regular reporting and peer engagement.

The IAC working languages are Spanish and English. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Venezuela is the depository of the IAC Convention Text. They are responsible to inform the IAC Secretariat and Parties of the accession or ratification of new member countries.

Partnerships with Global and Regional Frameworks

The IAC complements and reinforces broader international and regional commitments to marine biodiversity conservation and fisheries management. Strategic coordination with the following agreements enhances effectiveness and avoids duplication of efforts:

- **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES):** The IAC's focus on eliminating the illegal use of turtles and their derivatives directly aligns with CITES efforts to regulate and monitor international trade in endangered species. Collaboration supports enforcement, awareness, and compliance, especially in regions where turtle products remain in demand.
- **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD):** The IAC contributes to the implementation of CBD targets by protecting critical marine habitats, enhancing ecosystem connectivity, and promoting sustainable use. Its work supports CBD goals on species conservation, habitat integrity, and community-based stewardship.
- **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 14 – Life Below Water):** The IAC's priorities, such as reducing marine pollution, protecting marine ecosystems, increasing scientific knowledge, developing research capacity and the promotion of the use of best practices for the safe handling and release of sea turtles from fishing gear, are directly aligned with SDG 14. Its monitoring and capacity-building efforts also contribute to data collection and regional progress reporting.
- **Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar):** The IAC and Ramsar collaborate to protect sea turtles and their habitats, especially coastal wetlands and other Ramsar Sites that support sea turtle life cycle. Through shared initiatives and data exchange, they promote sustainable conservation of ecosystems vital to sea turtle survival across the Americas. The IAC has a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Ramsar to facilitate this collaboration. One of the results from this collaboration is the IAC Technical Document *Wetlands of International Importance and Sea Turtle Conservation* (IAC Secretariat. 2013).
- **SPAW Protocol of the Cartagena Convention:** The IAC shares geographic and ecological scope with the Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW), facilitating opportunities for joint initiatives, particularly in the Caribbean. Alignment between SPAW marine protected area networks and IAC conservation targets in particular implementation of conservation measures for the North West Atlantic Leatherback, can yield mutually reinforcing outcomes. The IAC has a Letter of Intent with SPAW to facilitate this collaboration.

- **Convention on Migratory Species (CMS):** As sea turtles are highly migratory species, the IAC supports the objectives of CMS by promoting coordinated conservation across national jurisdictions. Both instruments emphasize science-based action and transboundary cooperation, particularly for species like the loggerhead and leatherback turtles, which are CMS-listed. In particular, the IAC has ongoing collaboration with CMS sister agreements such as the Albatross and Petrels Agreement (ACAP), and the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia Memorandum of Understanding (IOSEA). The IAC has a Memorandum of Understanding with ACAP.
- **Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC):** The IAC shares geographic scope with IATTC. As bycatch in fisheries is one main threat to adult and juvenile sea turtles, the IAC contributes expertise in bycatch reduction in support of IATTC measures to reduce sea turtle bycatch in their fisheries. The technical collaboration supports the work of IATTC Bycatch Working Group. The IAC has a Memorandum of Understanding with IATTC to facilitate this collaboration. An example of this collaboration is the scientific publication, *Vulnerability of the Critically Endangered Leatherback Turtle to Fisheries Bycatch in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. I. A Machine-Learning Species Distribution Model*, prepared jointly by the IAC Scientific Committee and IATTC Scientific Staff (López et al., 2024).
- **International Atlantic Tuna Commission (ICCAT):** The IAC collaborates with ICCAT to support its efforts to reduce sea turtle bycatch in the Atlantic. This partnership also contributes to the work of ICCAT's Working Group on Ecosystems and Statistics, helping to streamline efforts and avoid duplication. The IAC has a Memorandum of Understanding with ICCAT to facilitate this collaboration.

IAC Budget

The IAC operates with an annual budget of approximately **\$230,000-\$250,000**, funded by contributions from its Parties. Despite this modest funding, the Convention has maintained core operations, supported national reporting, convened technical meetings of the Scientific and Consultative Committee, and policy meetings of the Conference of the Parties, and provided training and capacity building across the region. Key budget items include:

- Staff salaries and Secretariat operations
- Scientific and Consultative Committee annual meetings
- Conference of the Parties biannual meeting
- Technical workshops and training
- Support for national compliance and annual reporting using an online platform
- Translation Spanish / English and dissemination of technical documents, resolutions, and meeting reports.

Accomplishments

Despite limited resources and a very small Secretariat staff, the IAC supports its member countries in making significant contributions to sea turtle conservation in the Americas.

1. Population Stabilization and Recovery

- **Olive Ridley Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*):** Brazil has enhanced its conservation and research initiatives in key nesting areas for this species, resulting in notable population recovery trends from 2003 to 2019 (Projeto TAMAR, 2023).
- **Kemp's Ridley Turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*):** In 2011, the United States and Mexico developed a joint recovery plan for the Kemp's ridley sea turtle, led by NOAA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Mexico's SEMARNAT. The plan focused on restoring and protecting the species across the U.S. Caribbean, Atlantic, and Gulf of Mexico. Additional recommendations were issued by the recovery team in 2014 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2011).
- **Loggerhead Turtle (*Caretta caretta*):** Projeto TAMAR's long-term monitoring from 1991 to 2019 shows stable or increasing nesting trends across key loggerhead nesting beaches in Brazil (Stahelin et al., 2024).
- **Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and Olive Ridley Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*):** In 2007, after joining the IAC, Guatemala implemented a national ban on hawksbill and leatherback turtle egg consumption, one of the primary threats to the species, marking a critical step in its recovery efforts. In 2008 Guatemala implemented a registry for sea turtle hatcheries, specifically to monitor the olive ridley eggs conservation quota for the hatcheries (IAC Secretariat, 2011). Since 2013 Guatemala has worked towards establishing a Management Plan for their Exception for the species *Lepidochelys olivacea*, this process has been supported with recommendations from the IAC Scientific Committee under the Resolution CIT-COP6-2013-R1 and CIT-COP10-2022-R4.
- **Olive Ridley Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*):** Since 2013, Panama has worked to establish its Exception Management Plan on Isla Cañas for the olive ridley turtle. The management plan is completed to follow the implementation of Resolutions CIT-COP6-2013-R1 and CIT-COP10-2022-R3.
- **Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*):** Under Venezuela's National Sea Turtle Conservation Program, green turtle populations are monitored at the Isla de Aves Wildlife Refuge through recapture efforts and the tagging of both female and male individuals. Between 2005 and 2025, a total of 736,850 hatchlings were released as part of these conservation activities (Contribution from delegate of Venezuela to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).

In Venezuela, releases of hatchling sea turtles have included 137,416 **Hawksbill** (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), 126,905 **Leatherback** (*Dermochelys coriacea*), and 26,771 **Loggerhead** (*Caretta caretta*) individuals (Contribution from delegate of Venezuela to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).

- In 2013, Uruguay designated the five species of sea turtles present in the region as priority species for conservation by the National System of Protected Areas (SNAP). In 2015, these species were included in the Red List of Amphibians and Reptiles of Uruguay as threatened at the national level under IUCN criteria (Contribution from the delegate of Uruguay to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).

2. Habitat Protection

- In Costa Rica, conservation efforts have focused on reducing major threats to nesting sea turtles, including habitat degradation from pollution, sedimentation, solid waste, illegal egg harvesting, and even the hunting of adult females. One of the most effective strategies used to address these threats has been the establishment of hatcheries, where eggs are safely incubated (IAC Secretariat, 2011).
- In 2022, Panama renewed its National Action Plan for Sea Turtles, a comprehensive conservation strategy aimed at restoring and protecting sea turtle habitats from pollution and severe degradation. Originally introduced by Congressman Gabriel Silva, the law fosters collaboration with environmental non-governmental organizations such as The Leatherback Project and Panama Wildlife Conservation's Sea Turtle Project. It officially came into effect in March 2023 (IAC Secretariat, 2024).
- The Uruguayan territorial sea is a critical habitat for feeding, development, and/or a migratory corridor for five of the six species of marine turtles found in the IAC region. Over the past two decades, the National System of Protected Areas (SNAP) has established a corridor of marine-protected areas along the coastal strip (6 National Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and one Departmental) which has contributed to the protection of these critical habitats for marine turtles in the Southwestern Atlantic (Contribution from the Uruguayan delegate to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).
- The Dominican Republic based on technical advice from the IAC has adopted regulations on beachfront lighting near sea turtle nesting sites to support conservation efforts. In June 2025, the country formalized its commitment by signing a Memorandum of Understanding establishing the National Sea Turtle Network to coordinate nationwide protection measures (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2025; Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2025, June 25).

- Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have been established in Chile, which constitute a key tool for the conservation of marine biodiversity, including highly migratory and threatened species, such as sea turtles. These areas play a fundamental role in the protection of critical habitats, such as feeding zones, resting areas, and migratory routes. The design and management of MPAs incorporate ecosystem-based approaches, local participation, and international guidelines, such as those promoted by the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (IAC). In this context, some MPAs have implicitly recognized sea turtles as conservation targets, due to their presence in these areas. Among them, the following stand out:
 - La Puntilla-Playa Chinchorro Marine Reserve (Arica and Parinacota Region, established in 2023): the first MPA in the region, covering approximately 52.82 hectares. Its objective is to conserve the only resident colony of green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) in an urban environment in Chile, which exceeds 300 individuals and is associated with macroalgae meadows with a high food availability.
 - Multiple-Use Coastal Marine Protected Area (AMCP-MU) Mar de Pisagua (Tarapacá Region, declared in 2024) protects 73,460 hectares and is the first of its kind in northern Chile. Its creation aims to safeguard the biodiversity linked to the Humboldt Current, including the green turtle, combining conservation with artisanal fishing and sustainable tourism. Multiple-Use Marine Coastal Protected Area (MCPA-MU) La Rinconada (Antofagasta Region) is recognized as a frequent foraging area for juvenile green turtles.
 - Pan de Azúcar Island National Park (including marine area) regularly hosts green turtles in shallow waters near the island, providing feeding and resting habitats.
 - Nazca-Desventuradas Marine Park (Valparaíso Region, Decree No. 5/2016) is a transit area for sea turtles.
 - Juan Fernández Marine Park (Valparaíso Region, Decree No. 12/2018) includes transit and feeding areas for the leatherback turtle.
 - Motu Motiro Hiva Marine Park (Valparaíso Region, Decree No. 235/2010) provides feeding and resting habitats for sea turtles (Contribution from the Chilean delegates to the Scientific and Consultative Committee, 2026).
- The Ministry of Popular Power for Ecosocialism, through the General Directorate of Biological Diversity of Venezuela, and in coordination with Territorial Ecosocialism Units and organized community groups, implements targeted conservation actions under Venezuela's National Program for the Conservation of Sea Turtles. These actions are tailored to local ecological conditions, and conservation needs to support the recovery of sea turtle populations classified as globally endangered. Key measures include the protection of index nesting beaches, safeguarding of nesting females, relocation of nests at high risk of loss, in situ and ex situ nest protection, systematic monitoring and data

collection using standardized management protocols, and the release of hatchlings to enhance survival rates. Complementary awareness-raising and capacity-building activities are conducted to strengthen technical standards and harmonize conservation practices, grounded in field-based scientific evidence (Contribution from Venezuela's delegate to the IAC Scientific and Consultative Committee, 2026).

- Mexico currently has 25 turtle sanctuaries. In December 2022, a decree was published in the Official Journal of the Federation, recognizing 17 nesting beaches as natural protected areas with the category of sanctuary. This aims to establish schemes that ensure the preservation of their natural elements and the environmental services they provide. In December 2023 and January 2024, eight new natural protected areas (NPAs) were established with the category of sanctuary for the protection of sea turtle nesting beaches. These new NPAs are: El Verde Camacho Beach Sanctuary, Lechuguillas Beach Sanctuary, Platanitos Beach Sanctuary, Cahuitán Beach Sanctuary, Barra de la Cruz-Playa Grande Sanctuary, Morro Ayuta Beach Sanctuary, Totonacapan Beaches Sanctuary, and Chenkan Beach Sanctuary (DOF, 2023a; DOF, 2023b; DOF, 2024a; DOF, 2024b; DOF, 2024c; DOF, 2024d; DOF, 2024e; DOF, 2024f). Management Programs for 13 sanctuaries were published during 2024 and 2025: Playa Rancho Nuevo, Playa El Tecuán, Playa Ría Lagartos, Playa Chacahua, Playa Huizache Caimanero, Playa Mismaloya, Playa Piedra de Tlacoyunque, Playa Tierra Colorada, Playa Ceuta, Playa Cuitzmala, Playa Escobilla, Playas de Isla Contoy, and Playa Teopa. These are the main planning and regulatory instruments that establish the activities and basic guidelines for the management and administration of these PAs (DOF, 2024g; DOF, 2025a; DOF, 2025b; DOF, 2025c; DOF, 2025d; DOF, 2025f; DOF, 2025g; DOF, 2025h; DOF, 2025i; DOF, 2025j; DOF, 2025k; DOF, 2025l; DOF, 2025m; CONANP, 2025).
- On May 1st, 2026, Ecuador adopted Ministerial Resolution MAE-MAE-2026-0058-AM, expanding the protection and conservation of sea turtle nesting areas in Continental Ecuador. The resolution includes support text from IAC Article 18, Resolution Conservation of the EP leatherback CIT-COP10-2022-R6, and technical documents prepared by the IAC Scientific Committee on sea turtle index beaches CIT-CC10-2013-Tec.5. This important legislation highlights the contribution and value of the IAC and recommendations of its subsidiary bodies to create public policy and strengthen protection measures for sea turtles and their habitats in the IAC member countries (Contribution from Ecuador's delegate to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).

3. Fisheries Management and Bycatch Reduction

- In Argentina, regulations were adopted to reduce fishing effort in trawlers, including Federal Fisheries Council Resolution No. 2/2010, CTMFM Resolution No. 10/2000, and the implementation of seasonal fishing closures established by the CTMFM. In addition, an educational video was developed on sea turtle best handling practices in artisanal

fisheries operating in Bahía Samborombón and Cabo San Antonio, Province of Buenos Aires (Contribution from Argentina's delegate to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).

- The Belize Sea Turtle Conservation Network, a coalition of NGOs collaborating with the Fisheries Department, leads sea turtle conservation efforts in Belize. As part of its outreach, the network organized the “Belize Sea Turtle Expo 2009,” a traveling exhibit showcased nationwide. Belize continues its outreach efforts to raise awareness and promote conservation (IAC Secretariat, 2011, Fisheries Department of Belize).
- Brazil published Interministerial Ordinance MMA/MPA No. 60 in June, 2026, taking an important step to conserve sea turtles and promote the sustainability of shrimp trawl fishing in Alagoas, Sergipe, and northern Bahia. The regulation prohibits trawling from December 1 to March 15, when there is high interaction between fishing vessels and sea turtles, thus reducing bycatch and mortality. The measure especially benefits the olive ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), whose main breeding area in Brazil is located on the coast of Sergipe and northern Bahia. The regulation is the result of a broad participatory process started in 2023, coordinated by the Ministries of Environment and Fisheries, with the support of scientific and conservation institutions. More than 50 organizations and 700 participants contributed to the development of the proposal, which is based on decades of scientific monitoring and dialogue with the fishing sector. The measure is expected to provide benefits for over 540 kilometers of coastline. (Contribution from Brazil's delegate to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).
- In Brazil, fisheries that interact with sea turtles are under active monitoring, which requires mandatory data reporting and the presence of onboard observers. Ongoing research is evaluating mitigation strategies, such as the use of circle hooks in longline fisheries and temporary shrimp fishing bans near nesting areas to reduce incidental turtle catches (IAC Secretariat, 2011).
- Chile has established a comprehensive regulatory framework to address discards and bycatch in fisheries. Laws No. 19,713 and No. 20,625 prohibit discarding and set clear objectives for assessing and reducing both discards and bycatch through the implementation of targeted monitoring and mitigation plans. These measures are currently applied to over 90% of the country's fisheries and are supported by fisheries monitoring programs, including onboard observer schemes that collect biological and fisheries data. Chilean legislation also grants authorities additional enforcement powers. Notably, Law No. 20,657 (2013) authorizes the Undersecretariat of Fisheries and Aquaculture to mandate the use of bycatch reduction devices and the adoption of responsible fishing practices. Together, these measures strengthen Chile's regulatory framework for the protection of sea turtles (Contribution from Chile's delegate to the Scientific and IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).

In Chile, trawl fisheries exist but are limited in scope, strictly regulated, and confined to highly specific geographic and oceanographic conditions. For example, the shrimp fishery operates exclusively in cold waters through bottom trawling between the Antofagasta (21°26'S) and Biobío (38°28'S) regions, at depths of 100 to 500 meters over the continental shelf and slope, where water temperatures range between approximately 11°C and 12°C. These conditions are generally unsuitable for sea turtles, which are typically associated with shallower and warmer waters. As a result, interactions between trawl fisheries and sea turtles in Chile are considered negligible, significantly reducing risk to these species. Accordingly, the non-implementation of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) reflects an evidence-based management approach in which mitigation measures are applied according to demonstrated bycatch risk, while priority is given to measures addressing species that more frequently interact with bottom trawl fisheries and are in critical conservation status (Contribution from the Chilean delegate to the IAC Scientific and Consultative Committee, 2026).

- In Honduras, 16 fishermen, have taken initiative to protect sea turtles by extending the egg collection ban and relocating up to 20,000 eggs. From 2006 to 2010, the national ban on egg harvesting (enforced from September 1-25) was supported by the Certification and Environmental Control Commission (CVC-GOLF) and local fishermen, particularly in Ramsar-designated wetlands in the south (IAC Secretariat, 2011).
- In 2024, the Government of the Dominican Republic adopted a Ministerial Resolution to reduce the vessel strikes with sea turtles in Bavaro Lagoon. This resolution was prepared with the help of the IAC Scientific Committee with recommendations of zones with reduction of speed for vessels in the areas that sea turtles use for foraging (IAC, 2024). (IAC 2024 COP11 Report CIT-COP11-2024-Doc.5). The IAC Scientific Committee's Vessel Strikes Working Group is currently working on guidelines on Vessel Strikes and Sea Turtles, to provide technical support to IAC Member Countries.
- Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) are being implemented in shrimp trawl fisheries within IAC member countries where fishing activities overlap with sea turtle presence, including Mexico, the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, Brazil, and Panama. These countries have enacted legislation governing the mandatory use and technical specifications of TEDs and have established monitoring, compliance, and training programs for shrimp trawl fishery.
- Several IAC member countries, including Belize, Costa Rica, Venezuela, the Caribbean Netherlands, and Ecuador, have enacted bans on trawl fishing (IAC, 2018).

4. Regional Data Collection and Monitoring

- Over 1,000 nesting beaches across IAC Parties are now monitored using standardized protocols, enabling regional population trend assessments (IAC, 2018-2023).

- The IAC has reviewed more than 150 annual national reports since 2002, producing comparative analyses of threats, progress, and gaps (IAC, 2018-2023).
- In Ecuador, long-term monitoring of sea turtle nesting on key Galapagos beaches, launched in 2000 by the Charles Darwin Foundation, is now led by the Galapagos National Park Service to ensure its continued effort (IAC Secretariat, 2011).
- From 2013-2025, guided by IAC Exception Resolution and technical support, Guatemala and Panama began to establish management plans for exceptions for the subsistence harvest of olive ridley eggs. In 2014, Costa Rica followed, by updating their own exceptions management plan for olive ridley eggs in Ostional. Today, two countries have these regulatory frameworks in place, and one is in progress (IAC, 2013, 2015, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).
- The IAC maintains one of the region's most comprehensive nesting databases, covering index beaches from 13 countries and data of about 100 index beaches from 2009 to 2025. The Scientific Committee analyzes this data to produce every five years a technical document outlining sea turtle status, trends, and conservation recommendations to IAC Parties (IAC, 2023b).
- Argentina approved its *National Action Plan for the Conservation of Sea Turtles* in 2015. The Plan is implemented through two core programs that address major threats to sea turtle conservation in the country: interactions with fisheries and marine debris. In 2018, Argentina adopted the *National Action Program to Reduce the Interaction of Marine Turtles with Fisheries* (CFP Resolution No. 14/2018). Together with the *National Action Program to Reduce the Interaction of Marine Turtles with Marine Debris in the Argentine Republic* (COFEMA Resolution No. 317/2015), these initiatives constitute the foundational components of the national sea turtle conservation framework (Contribution from the delegate of Argentina to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).
- Honduras adopted a national sea turtle strategy in 2014, followed by Peru's Sea Turtle Recovery Plan in 2019, and Ecuador's updated Sea Turtle Action Plan in 2021. These efforts reflect a growing regional commitment to protecting sea turtles (IAC, 2014, 2019, 2021).
- In Venezuela, the National Marine Turtle Conservation Program has carried out the identification of potential nesting beaches along the Venezuelan coasts (Contribution from delegate from Venezuela to the Consultative Committee, 2026).
- In the Caribbean Netherlands, the IAC has supported the implementation of continuous monitoring at key index sites through financial resources provided by the Government of the Netherlands. Access to funding for monitoring activities has been facilitated following the Netherlands' accession to the treaty (Contribution from delegate of Caribbean Netherlands to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).

- Panama, within the framework of the 2026 Work Plan for the Conservation of Sea Turtles of the National Directorate of Coasts and Seas, highlights that the coordinated efforts of the Ministry of Environment of Panama and strategic civil-society partners ensure a unified approach focused on 21 priority nesting beaches, supporting nighttime patrols and the improvement of sea turtle hatcheries. (Contribution from Panama's delegate to the Scientific and Consultative Committee and Technical Focal Point of the IAC, 2026).

5. Capacity Building and Cross-Border Cooperation

- More than 50 regional workshops and training events have been held on nesting beach monitoring, hatcheries management, fisheries bycatch reduction, and enforcement of the law for instance identification of hawksbill products (IAC, 2002-2023).
- The IAC facilitated trilateral cooperation among Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador for conservation of the critically endangered Eastern Pacific hawksbill turtle, supporting coordinated protection at shared nesting beaches in the Gulf of Fonseca (Liles et al., 2015; IAC, 2021).
- To celebrate World Sea Turtle Day on June 16, IAC member countries host a range of regional outreach and capacity-building activities. These include webinars, local community events, and exchanges of experiences among countries. The IAC Secretariat collaborates with member states and intergovernmental partners to support and coordinate these efforts (IAC, 2023a).
- Since 2003, researchers, government representatives, and civil society from Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil have created the ASO network where they work collaboratively to protect sea turtles of the Southwestern Atlantic. The objective is to integrate regional efforts to standardize scientific methodologies and coordinate management actions that ensure the conservation of these species and the connectivity of their populations throughout the region. The network has more than 100 experts from the region who meet regularly to exchange knowledge and build alliances to promote the conservation of sea turtles at a regional level. The IAC has participated in these meetings through its delegates from the Scientific and Advisory Committee (Contribution from IAC Consultative Committee delegates from Argentina and Uruguay, 2026).
- Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, and the Dominican Republic participated as panelists in a webinar on World Sea Turtle Day (June 16, 2025) titled "Connecting with Sea Turtles" coordinated by the Republic of Ecuador with the support of the IAC Secretariat (IAC Bulletin No. 55). Likewise, IAC members from the Scientific and Consultative Committee from Costa Rica, Ecuador, Uruguay and Colombia participated as panelists at the webinar on World Sea Turtle Day (June 16-17, 2026) titled *Connecting regional efforts for the conservation of the ancient marine navigators*. This webinar was co-organized in partnership between IAC, the Permanent Commission of the South Pacific and Save the Blue Five Project. (Contribution from IAC Secretary, 2026).

- IAC Parties cooperate with non-member countries to respond to environmental emergencies, such as harmful algal bloom (red tide) events, by providing technical assistance, including sample analysis and diagnostic support. For example, scientists from the United States have assisted the Government of El Salvador in identifying the causes of mass sea turtle mortalities linked to toxic algal blooms (IAC USA Focal Point and Secretariat, 2026).
- The Scientific and Consultative Committee's Working Groups invite experts from non-IAC member countries to participate, as in the case of the Northwest Atlantic Leatherback Working Group, because effective conservation actions for this population requires cross-border cooperation with Canada, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. Technical documents with recommendations for protecting important habitats for this species have been prepared in collaboration with these experts (IAC, 2023c).
- The IAC has participated in the organization of side events at the Conferences of the Parties of other Conventions, such as the side event at the CMS COP in 2023 co-organized by the IAC Secretariat and the Government of France, and two side events co-organized by the IAC Secretariat and the Ramsar Secretariat at the Ramsar COP in 2022 (IAC Bulletin No. 52).

6. Technical Documents with Scientific Advice to Inform Decision-Making

The IAC Scientific and Consultative Committee has developed over 29 technical documents to support evidence-based policy and management decisions by IAC Parties. These resources provide scientifically grounded guidance on key conservation issues, including:

- long-term nesting trends at index beaches across the region;
- standardized monitoring protocols for nesting sites;
- best practices for minimizing sea turtle bycatch;
- methodologies for assessing climate change impacts on critical habitats;
- criteria for selecting and managing index nesting beaches;
- frameworks for developing and updating national sea turtle action plans;
- the ecological significance of coastal wetlands for sea turtles;
- protocols for data collection and emergency response to strandings;
- identification of priority conservation areas for leatherback turtles;
- the role of the Sargasso Sea in sea turtle life cycles;
- the impacts of marine debris;
- and the application of electronic monitoring technologies in fisheries to enhance compliance and collection information on sea turtles (IAC, 2011; IAC, 2017-2024).

7. Other Notable Efforts

- Argentina has enacted a Protocol for the Implementation of Marine Fauna Monitoring in Seismic Surveys (MAYDS Resolution No. 201/2021). This protocol establishes standardized procedures to mitigate potential impacts of seismic surveys on marine fauna and to harmonize the collection of data on the occurrence and behavior of observed species. The protocol applies to all marine mammals and sea turtles. (Contributions from the Argentinean delegate to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).
- Venezuela has implemented the National Training Plan for Sea Turtle Monitoring, focused on legislation, marine turtle conservation, contingency response, nest translocation, and standardized management protocols. The plan targets government institutions, non-governmental organizations, and organized community groups. Complementary outreach activities include school-based education initiatives under the pilot program “The Sea Turtle Comes to School,” as well as the convening of the First National Meeting of Sea Turtle Conservationists, which facilitated the presentation of research findings and the distribution of materials to support the implementation of marine turtle conservation projects nationwide. (Contributions from the Venezuelan delegate to the IAC Consultative Committee, 2026).
- Since 2012, the Undersecretariat of Fisheries and Aquaculture in Chile has convened the National Marine Turtle Group, a national forum bringing together specialists to share research advances and promote coordinated actions for marine turtle conservation. The group is currently developing a Manual of Good Practices. In parallel, several institutions conduct monitoring, education, and outreach activities, including TortuArica (Arica and Parinacota Region), Tortumar (northern Chile), NGO Qarapara (Atacama Region), and the Fisheries Development Institute (IFOP) at the national level. As scientific advisor to the fisheries authority, IFOP has documented incidental sea turtle capture since 2001 through its onboard observer program and research fisheries initiatives (PINV).

IFOP’s work includes biological monitoring of bycatch, studies on genetic connectivity, movement patterns, trophic ecology, environmental modeling, and the evaluation of bycatch mitigation measures, as well as training for fishers and broader education and outreach activities (Contributions from the Chilean delegate to the IAC Scientific and Consultative Committee, 2026).

- Panama has strengthened and updated its regulatory framework through Executive Decree No. 3 of May 27, 2026, which regulates the Direct Sanction Procedure for Environmental Infractions and establishes other provisions. With this decree, Panama has updated both its regulations and their applicability. An environmental violation related to sea turtles is defined as “the possession, holding, transfer, and transport for commercial and/or consumption purposes of products or by-products of sea turtles at the national level, even if the specimen was found fortuitously,” in violation of current regulations. The fines

include: \$2,000.00 for up to 15 eggs, \$5,000.00 for up to one (1) dead specimen, \$3,000.00 for up to one (1) live specimen, \$1,000.00 plus \$140.00 per kg for turtle meat up to 1 kg or one (1) hawksbill scute, and. \$2,000.00 per every 10 units for other products and by-products.

This update in the law aims to discourage crimes against natural resources. A public outreach plan will be implemented through media and social networks to inform communities about the Direct Sanction Procedure for Environmental Infractions, as well as the importance of sea turtles and the consequences of harming them and their ecosystems. (Contribution from Panama's delegate to the Scientific and Consultative Committee and Technical Focal Point of the IAC, 2026.)

- Panama is in the process of establishing the National Committee for the Protection, Conservation, and Sustainable Management of Sea Turtles in Panama, based on Law No. 371 of March 1, 2023. This law seeks to protect the five species of turtles that nest and circulate in the waters of the isthmus—olive ridley, hawksbill, leatherback, loggerhead, and green turtles—and their habitats.

The Committee will serve as a key coordinating body, operating *ad honorem*. It is composed of members from multiple sectors, ensuring a cross-cutting approach. The Chair of the committee is the Ministry of Environment (MiAMBIENTE), with co-coordination by the Aquatic Resources Authority of Panama (ARAP). Strategic partners include civil-society organizations (such as the Panatortugas Network, NGOs, and community-based organizations), academia, scientific research centers, local governments (municipalities), and delegates from coastal communities and Indigenous peoples. Responsibilities are based on national conservation policies and include designing five-year action plans incorporating monitoring programs, rehabilitation therapies, protection, and enforcement.

The Committee will recommend to MiAMBIENTE which portions of beaches or aquatic areas should be considered essential or priority habitats; it will also help channel funds and promote scientific and technological studies for species management based on reliable data. Its operations will be grounded in national plans executed by MiAMBIENTE in collaboration with communities. Delegates for the 11 member institutions have already been selected, and the official installation of the Committee is scheduled for the end of July 2026. (Contribution from Panama's delegate to the Scientific and Advisory Committee and Technical Focal Point of the IAC, 2026.)

Policy Recommendation: Strengthening Financial Sustainability and Regional Membership

Continued and predictable funding is essential to sustain the IAC's core operations, technical capacity, and regional coordination. Policymakers should prioritize stable budgetary support and pursue opportunities to expand financial contributions through partnerships with regional cooperation agencies, philanthropic donors, and other relevant stakeholders. Strengthening regional efforts to address threats to sea turtles depends on broader participation by countries as IAC Parties, which expands the reach of the Convention's measures, reinforces national conservation actions, promotes alignment across neighboring countries, and enhances collective impact on sea turtle population recovery. To this end, IAC Parties should continue to support the Secretariat in actively promoting, through diplomatic channels, the ratification of the Convention by additional countries.

Parties to the IAC

The IAC currently includes the following 16 Parties:

	País	Date of Deposit of the Instrument of Accession (A) or Ratification
1.	Argentina	June 7 of 2011 (A)
2.	Belice	February 3 of 2003
3.	Brazil	November 22 of 1999
4.	Chile	February 10 of 2010 (A)
5.	Costa Rica	April 17 of 2000
6.	Dominican Republic	July 26 of 2017
7.	Ecuador	October 6 of 2000
8.	Guatemala	August 15 of 2003 (A)
9.	Honduras	February 1 of 2001
10.	México	September 11 of 2000
11.	The Netherlands	November 29 of 2000
12.	Panamá	February 15 of 2008 (A)
13.	Perú	November 18 of 1999
14.	The United States	February 21 of 2001
15.	Uruguay	August 27 of 2007
16.	Venezuela	August 20 of 1998

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