

**Fishing Vessel Circular Letter No. 037**  
**24 February 2021**  
**Series: GEN-2021**

To: All Ship Owners, Operators, Deputy Registrars, Resident Agents, Representatives and other Stakeholders

Subject: **MEASURES TO MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF FISHING FOR ALL FISH STOCKS ON SEA TURTLES**

Reference: Issued in accordance with Part VIII, Section 50(1)(v) of the High Seas Fishing Act, 2013, IATTC Resolution C-19-04, ICCAT Recommendation 13-11 and 10-09

Circular Superseded: FVC-13/2016 Dated: 17-May-2016

### 1. BACKGROUND:

The incidental catch or interaction with sea turtles in fisheries has been a concern in the fisheries industry for decades. The growth of fishing activities in coastal areas and on the high seas has aided in the decline of several sea turtle populations. Sea turtles are known to navigate the oceans from nesting beaches to hunting grounds and back again, and in so doing they become a target of industrial and artisanal fisheries. Given the life cycle of these animals and in particular their regular proximity to or co-location to various fisheries, sea turtles are particularly vulnerable to interaction with certain fisheries methods. Turtles can become tangled in gillnets, purse seines and the lines associated with longline and trap/pot fishing gears. Trawls that are not fitted with turtle excluding devices (TEDs) do not allow turtles to escape, which may result in mortality through drowning.

### 2. MEASURES ADOPTED BY BELIZE

One way to mitigate fisheries interactions with sea turtles is to avoid them; however, this may be difficult as the same productive areas beneficial to fishing are also attractive feeding grounds for sea turtles. However, there is a significant number of management and technical methods that has been developed which can be used to reduce sea turtle interactions and mortality in marine capture fisheries.

- 2.1 Vessel owners/operators/crew shall promptly release, in a manner that causes the least harm to the extent practicable, **ALL** sea turtles, without compromising the safety of any persons.
- 2.2 Vessel owners/operators shall ensure that at least one crew member on board their vessel has been trained in techniques for handling and releasing of sea turtles to ensure survival after release.

## **2.3 This Administration requires that the following mitigation measures are implemented on board each fishing vessel in accordance with their type of fisheries.**

### **2.3.1 Purse Seine Fishing Vessels**

- a. Carry on board and employ when appropriate, safe-handling tools for the release of sea turtles (eg. Dipnets).
- b. Avoid encirclement of sea turtles to the extent practicable and, if encircled or entangled, take all practicable measures to safely release sea turtles following the handling and release guidelines in Appendix 1 and consistent with the *"Best Practices for Sea Turtles Handling and Release" of the FAO Guidelines to Reduce Sea Turtle Mortality in Fishing Operations (2009)*<sup>1</sup>
- c. Take all reasonable efforts whenever a sea turtle is sighted in the net to rescue the turtle before it becomes entangled in the net including if necessary, the deployment of a speedboat.
- d. Stop net roll, if a turtle is entangled in the net, as soon as the turtle comes out of the water and, to the extent practicable assist the recovery of the turtle before returning it to the water.
- e. Take the necessary measures to monitor Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) and to the extent practicable to release any sea turtles that become entangled and consider FAD designs and use that reduce the likelihood for sea turtle entanglement.
- f. Record all observed interactions involving seas turtles during purse seine fishing activities and report such interactions together with the relevant catch and effort monthly reports.

### **2.3.2 Long Line Fishing Vessels**

- a. Carry on board and employ when appropriate, safe handling tools for the safe release of sea turtles (eg. De-hookers, line cutters and dip nets).
- b. Take all reasonable steps, as appropriate, to ensure the safe release of any incidentally caught sea turtles by following handling and release guidelines in Appendix 1, and consistent with the FAO "Best Practice for Sea Turtle Handling and Release."
- c. Fishing vessels fishing in a shallow-set manner<sup>2</sup> shall employ at least **one** of the following mitigation measures:
  - i. Use only large circle hooks<sup>3</sup>
  - ii. Use only finfish for bait, OR
  - iii. Another mitigation measure to reduce sea turtle bycatch that has been approved by this Administration.
  - iv. Record all observed interactions involving seas turtles during long line fishing activities and report such interactions together with the relevant catch and effort monthly reports.

### **2.3.3 Trawlers**

- a. Permanently install in their nets Turtle Excluding Devices (TEDs)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/i0725e/i0725e.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> For purposes of this Circular, shallow-set manner, including surface longlines, means the majority of hooks fish at depths shallower than 100 meters.

<sup>3</sup> Large circle hooks are defined as a hook with the point turned perpendicularly back to the shank to form a generally circular or oval shape and the point of the hook not offset more than 10 degrees.

2.4 Vessel owners/operators are required to indicate the type of mitigation measures that they utilized on board their vessels at the time of application for fishing license. This data will be required to be completed on the application form.

## APPLICABILITY

This circular applies to all Belize flagged fishing vessels.

## MAINTENANCE

Vessels owners, operators and other stakeholders shall ensure that this Circular is acknowledged and observed.

## COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT

Failure to comply with any Circular shall result in disciplinary actions taken in accordance with Belize's Sanction Regulations S.I. 32 of 2014

## IMPLEMENTATION


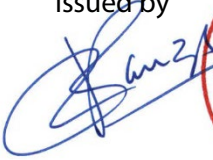
This Circular shall be implemented with immediate effect.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information direct all inquiries about this Circular to the Director of High Seas Fisheries of the Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit, Ministry of Finance, Government of Belize.

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Issued by



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## APPENDIX 1

### SAFE HANDLING AND RELEASE GUIDELINES FOR SEA TURTLES

#### 1. PURSE SEINE SAFE HANDLING AND RELEASE

- a. Whenever a sea turtle is sighted in the net, all reasonable efforts should be made to rescue the turtle before it becomes entangled in the net.
- b. If a turtle is entangled during net roll, the net should be hauled over the turntable to a height of about 2 meters, the main boom should be moved to starboard or to port (depending on the vessel's directions) and the net should be rolled back, so that the crew can release the turtle from the netting as soon as possible and return it to the sea over the starboard or port side if it is active. Net roll should not start again until the turtle has been disentangled and released.
- c. If, despite the measures taken under paragraph a and b above, a sea turtle is accidentally brought on board the vessel and is alive and active, or dead, the turtle should be released as quickly as possible.
- d. If the turtle is brought aboard the vessel and is comatose or inactive, resuscitation should be attempted (see section 3)

#### 2. LONG LINE SAFE HANDLING AND RELEASE

- a. When practicable and when operator or crew on board are trained, comatose sea turtles should be brought on board immediately.
- b. If a sea turtle is too large or hooked in such a manner as to preclude safe boarding without causing further damage/injury to the turtle, line clipper should be used to clip the line and remove as much line as possible prior to releasing the turtle.
- c. If a sea turtle is observed to be hooked or entangled by longline gear during hauling operations, the vessel operator should immediately cease hauling operations until the turtle has been removed from the longline gear or brought on board the vessel.
- d. If hooked externally or hook is fully visible, hooks should be removed from sea turtle as quickly and carefully as possible. If a hook cannot be removed from a turtle (e.g. ingested or in roof of mouth), the line should be cut as close to the hook as possible.
- e. Live turtles should be returned to the sea after handling:
  - i. By putting the vessel engine in neutral gear so that the propeller is disengaged, and the vessel is stopped, and releasing the turtle away from the deployed gear; and
  - ii. Observing that the turtle is safely away from the vessel before engaging the propeller and continuing operations.
- f. If the sea turtle is brought aboard the vessel in a comatose or inactive state, resuscitation should be attempted (see section 3).

#### 3. SEA TURTLE RESUSCITATION ON BOARD A VESSEL

- a. When handling a sea turtle, attempts should be made to hold the animal by the shell, avoiding the head and neck region and flippers.
- b. Strive to remove and/or disentangle any foreign items from the sea turtle, such as any plastic items, netting or embedded hooks etc.,

- c. Placing the turtle on its bottom shell (plastron) so that the turtle is right side up and elevating its hindquarters at least 6 inches (15 cm) for a period of 4 up to 24 hours. The amount of the elevation depends on the size of the turtle; greater elevations are needed for larger turtles. Periodically, rock the turtle gently left to right and right to left by holding the outer edge of the shell (carapace) and lifting one side about 3 inches (8 cm) then alternate to the other side. Gently touch the eye and pinch the tail (reflex test) periodically to see if there is a response.
- d. Sea turtles being resuscitated should be shaded and kept damp or moist but under no circumstances be placed into a container holding water. A water-soaked towel placed over the head, carapace, and flippers is the most effective method in keeping a turtle moist.
- e. Sea turtles that revive and become active should be released over the stern of the boat only when fishing gear is not in use, when the engine gears are in neutral position and in areas where they are unlikely to be recaptured or injured by vessels.
- f. Sea turtles that fail to respond to the reflex test or fail to move within 4 hours (up to 24, if possible) should be returned to the water in the same manner as that for actively move turtled.

