

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 29, 2021

Martha Williams
Principal Deputy Director
Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 2040

Dear Principal Deputy Director Williams:

We, the undersigned Members of Congress, are writing to request that you revise the critical habitat for endangered species: the hawksbill and leatherback sea turtle.¹ Specifically, we urge you to add Los Almendros beach in Rincón, Puerto Rico as a critical habitat. Due to increased activity in the region, we are concerned that these two turtle species, which nest on the beach, are at increased danger.

Our office has received several reports from concerned residents, environmental groups, and animal welfare organizations regarding the negative impact of development occurring at Los Almendros beach on the habitat of these turtles. Most recently, a female hawksbill turtle wandered into a swimming pool construction site, laid its eggs there, and was trapped inside.² Nearby residents reported that the turtle was harassed by stray dogs which posed a threat to both the turtle and its eggs. The following morning, an employee (authorized by the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources) and a volunteer from the University of Puerto Rico at Aguadilla's Vida Marina: Sea Turtle Conservation program helped free the turtle and then collected and relocated its approximately 180 eggs.³

This unfortunate incident clearly illustrates development disturbing these animals' habitat and the need for protection. Los Almendros beach is known as a nesting ground for hawksbill and leatherback sea turtles. The Office of Endangered Species of the Puerto Rico Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DRNA) report that Los Almendros beach hosts approximately 20 sea turtle nests per season. Furthermore, DRNA notes that because of coastal erosion, Los Almendros beach is one of the few remaining beaches in the municipality where there is a sandy coastline suitable for hawksbill and leatherback turtles to nest.⁴

¹ § 1533

² Carey queda atrapado en polémico proyecto de construcción en playa de Rincón. (2021, July 2). Primera Hora. <https://www.primerahora.com/noticias/puerto-rico/notas/carey-queda-atrapado-en-polemico-proyecto-de-construccion-en-playa-de-rincon/>

³ Carey gets caught up in controversial construction project in Rincon beach – PR Headline News. (2021, July). <https://www.puertoricoheadlinenews.com/carey-gets-caught-up-in-controversial-construction-project-in-rincon-beach/>

⁴ El DRNA enmienda orden y revierte la paralización de construcción de piscina en Rincón. (2021, July 17). El Nuevo Día. <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/notas/el-drna-enmienda-orden-y-revierte-la-paralizacion-de-construccion-de-piscina-en-rincon/>

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Under the Endangered Species Act, the federal government has the responsibility to protect endangered species and designate critical habitats (areas vital to the survival of endangered or threatened species). Los Almendros beach meets the Endangered Species Act criteria for designation as a critical habitat. The recent news is clear evidence that the beach is a “physical feature that the species needs for life processes and successful reproduction.” Furthermore, both the hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) sea turtles are listed as endangered under the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife.⁵ For this reason, we seriously request that you revise the critical habitat for hawksbill and leatherback turtles to include Los Almendros beach in Rincón.

Important to note, despite the designation of hawksbill and leatherback sea turtles as endangered creatures in 1970, researchers report that their populations are still decreasing. A 2020 FWS and NOAA review of the leatherback sea turtle population found that in Puerto Rico, leatherback sea turtle nesting trends decreased 4.61 percent annually from 1990 to 2017.⁶ If these trends continue, U.S. leatherback sea turtles in the Atlantic could decline by half within 30 years.⁷ While the current FWS 5-year status review of the hawksbill sea turtle is ongoing⁸, the World Wildlife Fund maintains that the hawksbill sea turtle population has declined globally by over 80 percent during the last century.⁹ The most significant causes of these population declines have been continued illegal trade in sea turtle products, turtles caught as fishing bycatch, as well as development, feral dogs, and illumination of beaches near sea turtle nesting areas.¹⁰

Protecting these turtles is vital to maintain the health, beauty, and vitality of Puerto Rico’s marine ecosystem. Hawksbills help maintain the health of coral reefs as they are one of the few animals known to eat sponges, which, in turn, helps coral grow.¹¹ Leatherback turtles, meanwhile, consume large numbers of jellyfish, helping keep the ecosystem in check.¹² We are concerned that continued development and lack of federal conservation efforts on Los Almendros beach will result an irrevocable loss of habitat for these sea turtles and threaten the rich biodiversity of Puerto Rico.

⁵ 50 CFR 17.11

⁶ Endangered and Threatened Wildlife; 12-Month Finding on a Petition To Identify the Northwest Atlantic Leatherback Turtle as a Distinct Population Segment and List It as Threatened Under the Endangered Species Act, 85 Fed. Reg. 42,928 (Aug. 10, 2020)

⁷ Feds: High extinction risk for all seven leatherback sea turtle populations. (2020, August 10). Center for Biological Diversity. <https://biologicaldiversity.org/w/news/press-releases/feds-high-extinction-risk-all-seven-leatherback-sea-turtle-populations-2020-08-10/>

⁸ Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Initiation of 5-Year Status Reviews for 25 Southeastern Species, 85 Fed. Reg. 16,951 (March 25, 2020)

⁹ Hawksbill turtle. (2015, March 6).

https://wwf.panda.org/discover/knowledge_hub/endangered_species/marine_turtles/hawksbill_turtle/

¹⁰ Fish & Wildlife Service. (n.d.). Hawksbill Sea Turtle. Fish and Wildlife Service.

<https://www.fws.gov/uploadedFiles/Hawksbillseaturtle%20ENG%20fact%20sheet.pdf>

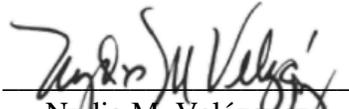
¹¹ Hawksbills. (n.d.). SEE Turtles. Retrieved July 23, 2021, from <https://www.seeturtles.org/hawksbill-turtles>

¹² Leatherback turtle. (n.d.). World Wildlife Fund. Retrieved July 23, 2021, from <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/leatherback-turtle>

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We ask you to designate Los Almendros beach as a critical habitat, particularly in light of the recent development's disruption. Thank you for your consideration, we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,


Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress


Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress


Steve Cohen
Member of Congress


Darren Soto
Member of Congress

CC:

Mr. Leopoldo Miranda, Regional Director Southeast Region U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1875 Century Boulevard NE, Suite 400 Atlanta, GA 30345

Mr. Gary Frazer, Asst. Director, Ecological Services, Fish and Wildlife Services, 5275 Leesburg Pike 1315 East-West Highway Falls Church, VA 22041-3803