



Hon. Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement on Hearing on H.R. 1761, Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs
July 28, 2011

Thank you, Chairman Fleming. First, I want to express my sincere gratitude to you and Ranking Member Sablan for scheduling this hearing today on the three multinational species conservation bills, including my bipartisan bill, H.R. 1761, *the Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act*. I also thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting as a witness my constituent, Carlos Diez, a biologist with the Government of Puerto Rico's Department of Natural and Environmental Resources. And I thank the other witnesses for appearing today, including Teiko Saito, for representing the dedicated employees of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Ian Somerhalder, who is a great champion for wildlife conservation.

Having survived for nearly 110 million years, marine turtles are among the world's oldest species. Marine turtles—like other majestic wildlife species that capture our hearts and imaginations—are imperiled. Once plentiful, six of the seven documented species of marine turtles are listed today as endangered, their survival threatened by various factors, including human exploitation and encroachment into their natural habitat.

Fortunately, we have in place a program at the Department of the Interior that supports partnerships and projects around the world to protect these species. This is because in 2004, in the face of declining marine turtle populations worldwide, Congress enacted—and President

George W. Bush signed into law—the Marine Turtle Conservation Act. This Act, which expired at the end of 2009, authorized the Fish and Wildlife Service to use a small amount of federal funding to support conservation efforts aimed at saving these magnificent species.

Since 2005, the program has been highly successful. Hundreds of applications have competed for \$5.9 million in appropriated funds, which in turn helped secure an additional \$8.6 million in non-federal funds—a remarkable return on investment. This program has served to position the United States as the world’s leader in marine turtle conservation.

As Puerto Rico’s representative in Congress, I have a particularly keen interest in—and special appreciation for—marine turtles. At least four of the seven species of marine turtles are found in Puerto Rico’s waters or nest on our beaches. Those turtle species are: the Leatherback, the Hawksbill, the Green Turtle, and the Loggerhead. Indeed, all of the coastal waters surrounding Culebra Island and Mona Island in Puerto Rico are designated as “critical habitats” by the federal government.

Mindful of the difficult fiscal environment, the bill I have introduced would reauthorize this program from 2012 to 2017 at current funding levels. Importantly, the bill would amend existing law to allow the Fish and Wildlife Service to award grants for conservation projects within the United States and its territories, a power the agency does not presently possess. This approach would ensure that federal support is available to conserve the six species of marine turtles listed under the Endangered Species Act, all of which nest on U.S. beaches or are found in

U.S. waters. I believe the survival of these species is important for its own sake, and also because they are instrumental in ensuring the health of the ocean ecosystem.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back the balance of my time.