Ecology

The present aggregations that are resident on the Bermuda Platform consist of immature turtles which originate from rookeries throughout the Caribbean and Central America.

Identification

Sharp, pointed beak, overlapping scutes on the shell (carapace) and a serrated appearance to the edges of the back half of the shell. Adult females average 82 cm straight carapace length and weigh 60 kg (132 pounds).

Range

Throughout the tropical and subtropical oceans of the world.

Habitat

Sea turtles have a complex life cycle that requires many different habitats, depending on their stage of development, often involving many different nations. Generally, adult females use beaches for nesting, neonate and young juveniles use convergence zones in the open ocean during the epi-pelagic phase, and both juveniles and adults use the benthic environments of coastal areas as feeding grounds. Bermuda serves as a developmental habitat for immature hawksbill turtles which are typically found on coral reefs.

Diet

Very young hawksbill turtles (neonates) begin feeding on plant and animal material (as well as plastics and tar balls) in oceanic surface waters. When juveniles enter coastal waters they feed primarily upon sponges, and to a lesser extent zooanthids and corallimorpharians (coral-like anemones).

Reproduction and Life Cycle

Sexual maturity is reached at the age of 25 years. Hawksbill turtles nest on island and continental beaches, generally between 30°N and 30°S latitude. Numerous eggs (100-150) are laid in a deep chamber dug into the sand during the night. Incubation typically lasts for about two months (depends on temperature) and after hatching the baby turtles crawl to the sea where they spend a number of years drifting with oceanic currents. The next phase of their life cycle involves living in benthic environments for two decades (e.g. Bermuda) after which they depart for their natal region where they will reach sexual maturity.

Why protect this species?

Hawksbill populations throughout the world are thought to be small and declining because of overfishing (for the shell) and the harvest of eggs from nesting beaches. Other threats include:

- Destruction/alteration of feeding and nesting grounds
- Incidental capture in gill net fisheries
- Entanglement and ingestion of marine debris
- Disease (notably fibropapillomatosis)
Hawksbill turtle
Eretmochelys imbricata

What is being done to conserve it?

Hawksbill turtles are protected under Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) which restricts their international trade.

Protected Species Act Listing: Level 1, 2012

IUCN Red List: Critically Endangered (A2bd) ver. 3.1

Recovery Plan: A plan was created in 2014 which discusses the threats and conservation efforts for this species. Sarkis, S., Outerbridge, M. 2014. Management Plan for Bermuda’s Resident Green and Hawksbill Sea Turtles (Chelonia mydas, Eretmochelys imbricata). Department of Conservation Services, Government of Bermuda.

Viewable for download www.environment.bm

Research: Genetics, size classes, growth rates, international migration patterns and local causes of mortality. There is a great need to understand local population size and trends in abundance.

Habitat protection: Bermuda’s coral reef environments are protected by the Protected Species Act (2003) and the Fisheries Order (1978) respectively. This species would benefit from protection being afforded to the Sargasso Sea.

Reporting injured animals: Members of the public can call or deliver injured sea turtles to the Bermuda Aquarium, Museum and Zoo, #17 North Shore Road, Flatt’s Village, Bermuda. Tel (441) 293-2727.

Protective legislation

Fisheries Act (1972)
Protected Species Act (2003)

What you can do?

Learn: Understand how destruction of habitat leads to loss of endangered and threatened species and Bermuda’s plant and animal diversity. Tell others what you have learned.

Do not litter: Marine debris is a serious threat to wildlife. Abandoned fishing line causes turtle entanglement and death by drowning.

Operate motor boats and jet skis with caution when travelling through areas populated by sea turtles.

Join a conservation group: such as the Bermuda Zoological Society or the Bermuda Audubon Society.

Information sources


For Further Information
#17 North Shore Road, Flatt’s, FL04, Bermuda (441) 293 2727.
www.environment.bm

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on the knowledge and understanding at the time of writing.