

Hawksbill Sea Turtles



Considered by many to be the most beautiful of sea turtles for their colorful shells, hawksbill turtles are found in tropical waters around the world. Hawksbills spend their time in coral reefs, rocky areas, lagoons, oceanic islands, and shallow coastal areas. This turtle is named for its narrow head and sharp, bird-like beak which enables it reach into cracks and crevices of coral reefs looking for food. Their diet is very specialized, feeding almost exclusively on sponges. One of the smaller turtles, adults weigh between 100-200 pounds (45 - 90 kg) and reach 2-3 feet (roughly .5 to 1 meter) in length.

Facts:

- Their scientific name is *Eretmochelys imbricata*
- Hawksbills are solitary nesters, nesting in low densities on small scattered beaches. Adult females are well adapted for crawling over reefs and rocky areas to reach secluded nesting sites.
- On average, they nest roughly 4 times per season at 2 week intervals and lay around 140 eggs per nest. Nests however, may contain over 200 eggs!
- Hawksbills are considered Critically Endangered around the world by the IUCN Red List and are listed as Endangered in the US.
- Some researchers believe the Eastern Pacific hawksbill is likely the most endangered sea turtle population worldwide.

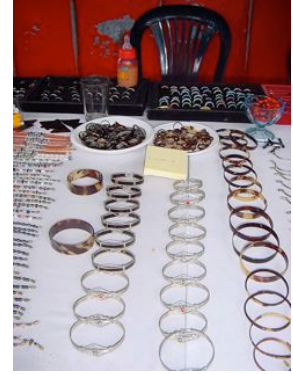


Distribution:

This species inhabits tropical and some sub-tropical regions in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. The largest populations occur in the Caribbean Sea, the Seychelles, Indonesia, Mexico, and Australia. Hawksbills are not found in the Mediterranean and few are found in US waters; only a handful of hawksbills nest in Florida each year.

Major Threats:

The hawksbill population has declined more than 80% in the last century, primarily due to the trade in their beautiful carapace (shell), also referred to as “tortoiseshell”. Its carapace, brightly colored with intricate designs, is traded internationally for ornamental purposes. The shell is used for items such as jewelry, combs and brushes, and inlay in furniture and other decorative pieces (photo at right). Hawksbills were hunted almost to extinction prior to the ban on the tortoiseshell trade; Japan imported an estimated 2 million turtles between 1950 and 1992. Despite the fact that the international trade of their shells is illegal, there is still a black market.



Other threats include destruction of nesting and feeding habitat, pollution, boat strikes, coastal development, entanglement in fishing gear, and destructive fishing practices like dynamite fishing. Dynamite fishing uses explosives to stun or kill fish, usually on reefs, for easy collection. The practice also causes extensive damage to coral reefs and harms other animals that may be nearby. Although illegal, this destructive type of fishing is still widespread in Southeast Asia, the Aegean Sea, El Salvador, and Africa.

Did You Know?

- Because of their sponge diet, their flesh is harmful to humans. Sponges contain toxic chemical compounds which accumulate in the animal’s tissues. The consumption of their meat by humans may cause serious illness and in extreme cases even death.
- Hawksbills are important inhabitants of coral reefs. By consuming sponges they play an important role in the reef community, aiding corals in growth. It’s estimated that one turtle can consume over 1,000 pounds of sponges per year. Without them, sponges have the ability to overgrow corals and suffocate reefs.
- It is illegal to trade, purchase or possess sea turtle products. When purchasing “tortoiseshell” products overseas, be sure you are buying synthetic materials and not sea turtle products.



Links & Resources:

IUCN Red List of Endangered Species: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/8005>

Article on Hawksbill Trade: <http://www.wildlifeextra.com/go/news/hawksbill-souvenirs009.html#cr>

State of the World's Turtles Distribution Map: <http://seaturtlestatus.org/learn/maps/hawksbill>



These materials are provided by SEE Turtles, a non-profit project that protects sea turtles through conservation travel. Visit our website, www.seeturtles.org for other fact sheets, school lesson plans, fundraising ideas, presentations, and field trips. Contact us at info@seeturtles.org for more information.