

Hawksbill Hawksbill Turtle Turtle

Tortuga Carey (Spanish)

Eretmochelys imbricata

Class: Reptilia
Order: Testudines
Family: Cheloniidae
Genus: Eretmochelys

Distribution

Worldwide
circumtropical

Habitat

They live around coastal
and coral reefs, rocky areas,
estuaries and lagoons.

Food

Adult hawksbills feed
almost primarily on
sponges and soft bodied
marine invertebrates.

Reproduction

The mating season varies
somewhat with location.
They mate bi-yearly in
secluded lagoons in remote
islands throughout their
range. Males lie in wait for
the females to return to
their beaches. Copulation
usually begins in shallow
water near the shore. These
lagoons are adjacent to
prospective nesting
beaches.



Hawksbill turtles are found in tropical, subtropical and temperate waters in all the oceans of the world. They usually occur from 30° N to 30° S latitude in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. They are the most tropical of all marine turtles.

Turtles use different habitats at different stages of their life. In general, they are found in water no deeper than 18.3 m. Hawksbills nest throughout the tropics with significant sites in Australia, the Seychelles, the Caribbean and Mexico.

The narrow head and jaws, shaped like a beak, allow it to get food from crevices in coral reefs. They eat sponges, anemones, squid and shrimp. Post hatchlings during their oceanic phase feed on plankton. They are often found floating in masses of sea plants.

Although sea turtles live most of their lives in the ocean, adult females must return to beaches on land to lay their eggs. They often travel long distances between foraging grounds and nesting beaches. Nest preparation is an elaborate and time-consuming process. Females first sweep the loose, dry sand away from a nest site. She then uses her rear flippers to dig a hole by alternatively scooping sand with left and right flippers, flinging sand forward with her head. She lays approximately 130 eggs in her nest. The number of eggs relate to body size. A large female may lay 200 eggs. After laying she fills in the chamber and then disguises the nest site. This process lasts between one to three hours. She returns to sea but comes back to repeat this activity 14 days later. She may lay between one and seven clutches per year.

Development

The incubation period for hawksbill eggs averages 55 to 60 days. Hatchlings are quite small, weighing 14 g. They are about 42 mm long. They immediately and instinctively head to the sea. Oceanic stage juveniles enter a pelagic environment taking shelter in floating mats of sargassum and weedlines. Growth is slow.

Characteristics

The shell is thin, flexible and highly coloured with elaborate patterns. On the carapace they have thick posteriorly overlapping scutes (scales of the shell). They are unique among sea turtles in having two pairs of prefrontal scales on the top of the head and have two claws on each flipper.

Adaptations

They have streamlined bodies and large flippers, well adapted to a marine environment. They are highly migratory.

Status /Threats

IUCN Red Book lists them Critically Endangered. CITES (Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species) has listed the Hawksbill under Appendix I, among the most endangered of species. It has been listed under the Endangered Species Act since 1970.

Sightings at Caño Palma

References

<http://www.cites.org/eng/prog/hbt.shtml> <http://www.turtles.org/hawksd.htm>
<http://www.environment.gov.au> <http://www.iucnredlist.org/search/details.php/8005/summ> All extracted Aug 2008

Gender of hatchlings is determined by the temperature of the nest. Upon entering the water they swim directly out to sea, spending the next five to ten years drifting in surface water carried by ocean currents. For years efforts to save the hawksbill focused primarily on safeguarding the eggs and hatchlings. Little is known of where they forage as juveniles and adults while at sea. Satellite tracking is used to learn more about these mariners during this stage of development. Once they reach about 35 cm, they re-enter coastal waters. Dietary preferences change to benthic foraging. Growth rates vary geographically. Generally juveniles reside in shallow reefs, and as they mature move to deeper depths. Males mature when they are about 69 cm long, females at about 78 cm long. Actual age of maturity is unknown.

It gets its common name from the beak-like mouth, and its species name '*imbricata*', from the imbricate nature of its scutes, meaning they overlap (somewhat like a shingled roof). The carapace has an amber background patterned with an irregular combination of light and dark streaks of amber, yellow or brown. Black and mottled brown colours radiate to the sides. The shape is an elongated oval. The plastron is yellowish with black spots. Juveniles are black or very dark brown, and somewhat heart-shaped. As they mature the shape changes. Adults can grow up to a metre in length. Average adult weight is around 60 k. The heaviest ever captured was 127 k.

Hawksbill turtles, like most turtles, have a hard shell that discourages predators from trying to eat them. They are able to eat sponges known to be toxic to other animals. These sponges have high silica content, making these turtles one of the few animals capable of eating siliceous organisms. They are sponge specialists.

These turtles have been exploited for hundreds of years, being the sole source of tortoiseshell. Populations are in a constant state of decline. They are protected by various international treaties but conservation efforts in one country may be jeopardized by activities in another. All sea turtles are protected by territorial law, prohibiting the harvesting of eggs and adults, but poaching persists. Some countries, belonging to CITES exempt themselves from the ban on hawksbill trade. Others merely ignore their obligations as signators to CITES. Hawksbills are susceptible to injuries from boats and can become tangled in fishing nets. Reduced or altered nesting habitats also contribute to their decline.

These have been seen hauling up on the nearby beach, but not recently. Sightings are now quite rare.