

Sea Turtle Fact Sheet

Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

Endangered Sea Turtles

Ancient ocean dwellers, sea turtles have lived on the Earth for 150 million years, since before the time of the dinosaurs. All seven species of sea turtles are endangered and protected under various national laws and international treaties. Sea turtles' hydrodynamic body shape and paddle-shaped limbs or flippers make them agile swimmers. Though fully adapted to marine life, sea turtles depend on land to complete the most critical stage of their life cycle, reproduction. They build their nests and deposit their eggs only on tropical and subtropical sandy beaches.

Appearance

Hawksbill sea turtles have a slender body and head, and a narrow beak that resembles that of a hawk and is designed for foraging in coral. Its shell, thought by many to be the most beautiful of the sea turtles, is reddish or dark brown. The hawksbill is the only sea turtle whose scutes (sections on the outer carapace) overlap each other.

Weight: 120 lbs (55 kg)

Carapace length: 2.5 feet (0.8 meters)

Status

The hawksbill is internationally recognized as an endangered species, and was listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act as endangered in 1970.

Habitat and Feeding Behavior

The species lives in the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. Hawksbills live around coral reefs, rocky shallows, shallow coasts and lagoons in tropical and subtropical seas.

Food: The food of adult hawksbills includes sponges, jellyfish, starfish, fish, urchins and crustaceans. Hawksbills sometimes eat poisonous sponges. However, the poison does not harm them, but they store it in their flesh. For this reason, hawksbill meat is often poisonous.



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Nesting

Hawksbills lay about 160 eggs per nest. Females nest every 2 or 3 years, and lay several nests per season. Biologists are uncertain when hawksbills reach reproductive maturity. It could range from 20-50 years of life. The average hatchling weighs .58 oz. (17 grams) and has a length of 1.75 inches (4.5 cm).

Primary breeding grounds: At least 60 different tropical and subtropical countries.

Threats

Because their shell is so beautiful, hawksbill sea turtles have been harvested since Egyptian times. The fashion style known as "tortoiseshell" is based upon the pattern of hawksbill shells. Historically, traders would pay as much as \$100/lb (\$225/kg) for hawksbill shells. Though shell trade is banned by international treaty, the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), illegal trade continues.

Major threats to the survival of the hawksbill sea turtle include:

- ◆ large scale poaching of adult turtles for their beautiful shells;
- ◆ commercial exploitation of sea turtle eggs;
- ◆ drownings in shrimp nets and other fishing gear;
- ◆ development and destruction of nesting beaches; and
- ◆ ocean pollution.

