



Endangered Species of The Bahamas



Artwork by Melissa Maura

HAWKSBILL TURTLE

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Eretmochelys imbricata

DESCRIPTION

The Hawksbill is considered to be the most beautiful sea turtle. Its hard top shell, called *carapace*, is made up of dark brown, or yellow and brown scales. These scales overlap like shingles on a roof. The Hawksbill's bottom shell is yellow and is called the *plastron*. The skin of its head and flippers has brown patches rimmed in yellow. The hawksbill gets its name from its beak: the top of it hooks down over the lower jaw, much like the bill of a hawk. This sea turtle measures a little less than three feet long and usually weighs a little over one hundred pounds as an adult. Hawksbills and other sea turtles are reptiles.

DIET

The Hawksbill is an omnivore, eating both meat and plants. It feeds on algae, sea grasses, barnacles and fish, but sponges and sea urchins are its favourite food.

REPRODUCTION

Hawksbill sea turtles mate in the water. After mating, the female Hawksbill turtle usually nests at night. She drags herself out of the sea and onto a nesting beach up beyond the reach of high tide. Using her hind flippers like shovels she scoops out a bottle shaped hole and lays about one hundred white, leathery eggs that look like ping-pong balls. She covers the nest with sand and returns to sea, paying no further attention to it and never seeing her young.

The sun's rays heat the beach, warming the turtle eggs buried in the sand. Temperature will determine the sex of the young turtles. Females emerge from the eggs on top where warmer temperatures are found; males emerge from the bottom where cooler

temperatures are found, The eggs are ready to hatch in about two months. Almost all must hatch at the same time, for they all must share the work of digging out of the nest. When the hatchlings are an inch or two below the surface of the beach they become quiet and wait for the surface temperature to drop, usually indicating nightfall. Under the protection of darkness the baby turtles burst out of the nest and rush to the water. Phosphorescence, a light given off by organisms living in the sea, creates a glow that provides direction for these turtles as to the location of the ocean. The hatchling instinctively heads for this "bright" horizon. Tragically in settled areas, hatchlings are now attracted to the bright lights of highways, hotels and parking lots and head away from the sea instead of towards it. They are usually killed. Thousands of hatchlings are lost this way each year.

HABITAT

Hawksbills prefer warm tropical waters. They are usually found in coastal waters around coral reefs. Hawksbills nest in low numbers throughout The Bahamas and the Wider Caribbean. Areas of concentration (although numbers are always very low) are: Mona Island off Puerto Rico, Buck Island in U. S. Virgin Islands, Antigua, Panama, Los Roques, Venezuela and the Caribbean coast of Mexico.

STATUS

The Hawksbill is seriously endangered throughout the world and especially in the Caribbean region. It is listed in Appendix I of the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) meaning that Hawks- bills are near extinction or very endangered. The harm, capture or possession of any Hawksbill turtle is prohibited by law in The Bahamas.

THREATS

Commercial use: The Hawksbill is prized by man for its beautiful shell which is used to make tortoise shell combs, buttons, hair clips and jewelry, thus making man a major threat to its existence. It is also killed and stuffed to hang on walls as decoration.

Habitat destruction: Coastal development, and resulting pollution, is contributing to a decline in Hawksbill and other sea turtle populations world wide.

Natural threats: Adult sea turtles, which are both fast and heavily armoured, have few natural enemies, although sharks can do great damage to them. Young sea turtles have many enemies – ants, crabs, dogs, racoons, lizards, carnivorous fish and birds - that sometimes eat them immediately after hatching.

INTERESTING FACTS

- Sea turtles sleep at night, While sleeping or resting, they can remain underwater for hours without breathing.
- The taking of turtle eggs is prohibited by law in The Bahamas.
- It is believed that Hawksbills never move far from their nesting beaches.



Sponsored by RBC Royal Bank of Canada

© 1995 The Bahamas National Trust, P. O. Box N-4105, Nassau, Bahamas