

Hawksbill Turtle



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FastFacts

- Identified by overlapping scutes and a beak with a distinct overbite compared with other sea turtles.
- Females have a carapace length of approx. 82cm and weigh around 50kg.
- Estimated to live around 50 years. They don't reach sexual maturity until after 31 years of age.
- Feed primarily on jellyfish, but enjoy a variety of other animals and plants.
- Sex of hatchlings depends on temperature of the nest during incubation: cool=males and warm=females.

OceanWanderers

Each year, thousands of tiny turtle hatchlings will clamber out of their sand nests and run past the gauntlet of predators awaiting their emergence to find shelter in the ocean. Guided only by the moonlight, these little bite size morsels, will make their way out to the deep offshore waters, not taking time to rest or eat until they reach relative safety. They will then wander the seas, largely at the mercy of the predominant ocean currents, grazing and growing, for the next five to ten years. Finally, they will settle on a feeding ground where they may spend decades before they once again head for open ocean, traveling perhaps thousands of kilometers, to reach the beaches where they were born. There are countless hazards along the way and only a very small percentage will make it back to breed. Hawksbill turtles are in global decline with trends indicating that populations in northeast Australia will decline by 90% in less than one generation of the species.

Hawksbill turtles are highly migratory, moving up to 2,400 kilometres between foraging areas and nesting beaches. The Coral Sea is a migratory corridor for Hawksbill turtles moving between foraging and nesting grounds.

LATINNAME

Eretmochelys Imbricate
(Linnaeus, 1758)



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ConservationConcerns

Hawksbill turtles are very slow growing and don't reach sexual maturity until around 31 years of age. This means it takes populations a very long time to recover from a decline.

Females lay clutches of eggs at two week intervals during the breeding season. In the Coral Sea region, turtles nest all year round with peak activity during January-February. The eggs must be buried in sand that is aerated, low in salt, high in humidity, and between 25°C and 33°C. In northeastern Australia, the females will usually breed every five years.

Breeding males and females will move from their feeding grounds

Hawksbill turtles are listed as a vulnerable, marine and migratory species under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. There have been serious population declines of hawksbill turtles worldwide. The breeding population at Milman Island (northern Great Barrier Reef) has been declining 3-4% per year for the last decade. If this continues at this rate, the Torres Strait-northern GBR stock can be expected to decline by 90% by 2020, which is less than one generation for this species.

In Australia, the main current threats are disturbance and habitat damage due to coastal development, by-catch from fisheries and shark control, predation on nests, boat strikes, entanglement and ingestion of marine debris, and unsustainable levels of indigenous harvest in some areas. Other threats include climate change, chance disasters such as oil spills and feral predator invasions.

Sources

- Limpus, C. 2009. A Biological Review of Australian Marine Turtles 3. Hawksbill Turtle, *Eretmochelys imbricata* (Linnaeus). State of Queensland. Environmental Protection Agency.
- Australian Government. *Eretmochelys imbricata* - Hawksbill Turtle. Species Profile and Threats Database. Online source: www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=1766 [accessed 13th October, 2009].

Photo: Shelby Temple