

## Species profile: Hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

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Having been fortunate enough to snorkel alongside them while in Barbados (but careful not to touch or otherwise interfere with them in any way), the following is a short species profile on the hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*).

The hawksbill sea turtle is one of seven species of sea turtle (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration., n.d.). It can grow to around one meter (three feet) in length, and weigh upwards of 127 kg (280 lb) (Beggs et al., 2007). In the morphological sense, this particular species of sea turtle goes by the moniker *hawksbill* due to a literal beak - known also as a tomium - protruding from its nose (Gorham et al., 2014).

*E. imbricata* is an omnivore, and the bulk of its diet consists of sea sponges, which in the Caribbean comprises of sponge orders such as Astrophorida, Spirophorida, and Hadromerida. Other food resources include sea anemones, algae, jellyfish, and cnidarians (Sea Turtle Conservancy, n.d; Meylan, 1988). Though often seen in the Caribbean, hawksbill sea turtles are a global migratory species, existing anywhere from open water to mangrove swamps, coral reefs, and lagoons (Lutz & Musick, 2017). It should be noted, however, that they primarily frequent subtropical and tropical waters (Sea Turtle Conservancy, n.d).

Hawksbills are known to breed twice per year, usually around lagoons not far from nesting beaches where females will lay their clutches of eggs, burying them in the sand until they hatch (Lutz & Musick, 2017). The young will then swim out to sea to begin their new lives, though many of them will not survive the initial leg of the journey due to predators. This is why clutches of eggs can number more than one hundred (Lutz & Musick, 2017), thus ensuring that some will survive, and that the species lives on. If not predated upon during development, researchers believe that hawksbill sea turtles can live anywhere between 30 and 50 years (National Wildlife Federation, n.d.).

Aside from normal predators such as octopus, pelagic fish, and sharks (Edelman, 2004), the biggest threat to the hawksbill sea turtle is humans. Aside from accidental deaths by boats and deliberate killings from illegal poaching, developed coastal areas can be incredibly damaging for hawksbill sea turtle breeding, including the use of lights, which can confuse young as to which direction the water is located after hatching.

Fortunately, conservationists are developing a number of strategies that will hopefully ensure the survival of present and future generations of hawksbill sea turtles. Two quick examples include laws that enforce coastal residents to keep porch and backyard lights off at night during the breeding season, and the fact that the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) declared it illegal to capture or trade hawksbill sea turtles (Sea Turtle Conservancy, n.d.).

## References

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