

Inter-American Convention for the Conservation and Protection of Sea Turtles

Hawksbill Decline in the Wider Caribbean and Western Atlantic

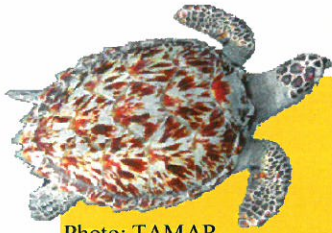
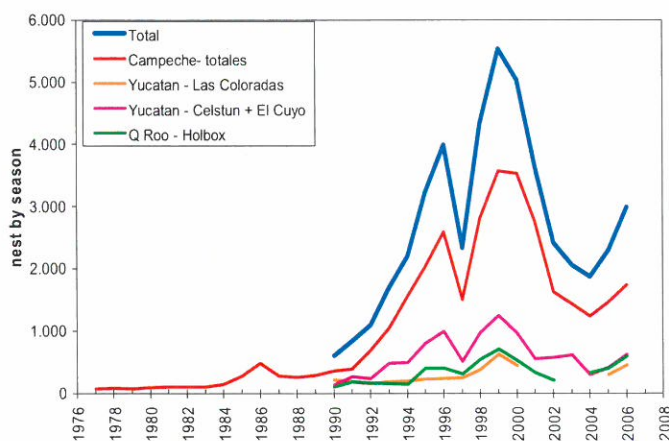


Photo: TAMAR

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List classifies the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) as a critically endangered species, having lost more than 80% of its reproductive age classes in less than three generations. Of particular concern are recent studies showing a drastic decline in hawksbill nesting in the Yucatan Peninsula (Mexico), home of some of the most important nesting sites in the Caribbean. Annual number of nests dropped from about 6,400 in 1999 to less than 2,400 nests by 2004, an alarming drop of 63% in 5 years¹.

Why is the population in decline? Hawksbills are the most tropical of all sea turtles, spending most of their lives in coastal waters, including coral reefs and other hard bottom habitats. They are highly specialized, feeding mainly on marine sponges, using their peculiar shaped beak to get food out of crevices in the reefs. Loss of coral reef communities is a global threat to hawksbills. Coral reefs are vulnerable to the destruction and degradation caused by human activities, such as pollution and toxic spills. Global climate change may also be negatively impacting coral reefs by causing higher incidences of coral diseases, often killing off entire communities. As coral reefs continue to decline, so will the hawksbills.



Number of hawksbill nests per season at Mexico's main nesting sites. Note the sharp decline since 2000. This season (2006-07), Campeche is expecting just over 1000 nests, dipping below the lowest registered number in 1999. Source: data presented at the XII Regional Workshop on Sea Turtle Conservation in the Yucatan Peninsula¹. (update provided by V.Guzman)

Historically, over-exploitation of hawksbill eggs, meat and carapace (shell) was the primary cause of their decline. Despite the fact that international hawksbill trade is now prohibited by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), illegal trade continues to threaten their survival. Juvenile and adult turtles are captured for their beautiful shell, which is made into jewelry and other products commonly known as "tortoise shell". These include rings, bracelets, combs and other items.



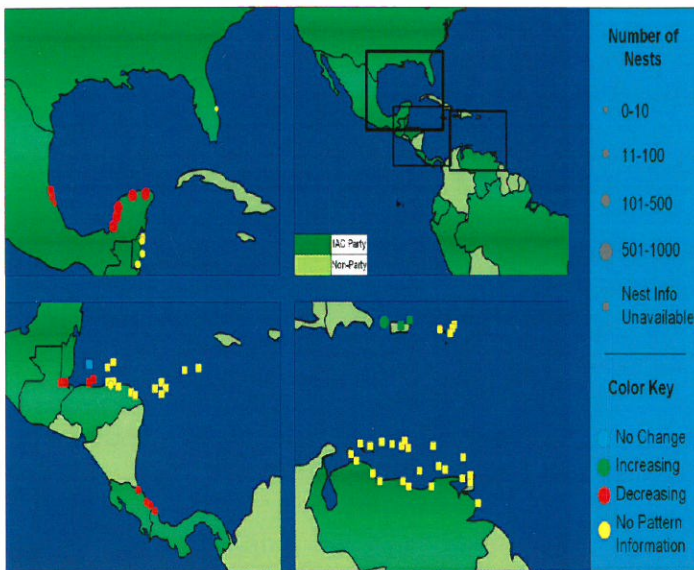
Photos: D.Chacón/ANAI

The persistence of several other threats such as incidental capture in fisheries and increasing disturbance of critical nesting habitats by coastal development without planning also exist.

What courses of action can we take? As an individual and a consumer, never buy or sell sea turtle products. Reduce the amount of plastic garbage you produce and the amount of chemicals you use. Remember, ocean protection begins on land. International cooperation is essential in managing this shared resource. Increased support for scientific research and population monitoring is needed in order to better understand this species and its management needs.

Principal Threats

- Egg & turtle harvesting; ornamental use of shell
- Destruction and alteration of nesting habitat; loss of coral reefs
- Illegal & incidental capture in fisheries



Important Hawksbill Nesting Sites in the Wider Caribbean and Western Atlantic. Information provided in this map comes from the IAC Annual Reports by the Contracting Parties (www.iacseaturtle.org).

The Inter-American Convention for the Conservation and Protection of Sea Turtles (IAC) is committed to promoting the protection, conservation and recovery of sea turtle populations and their habitats, emphasizing bilateral and multilateral agreements and information and technology exchange. Due to the hawksbill's critical state, the Third Conference of the Parties, held in Mexico in 2006, approved **Resolution CIT-COP3-2006-R-1, Conservation of the Hawksbill Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)**. The resolution calls for joint efforts in organizing a technical workshop with recognized experts to evaluate the current condition of hawksbill populations in the Wider Caribbean and Western Atlantic and present the best available methods of research and conservation for the species in its marine habitats.

Hawksbill Resolution:

- monitor use & illegal trade
- enforce existing legislation & stop illegal trade
- support & strengthen research and monitoring activities
- improve scientific basis of conservation measures
- evaluate & mitigate incidental capture according to FAO recommendations
- organize a regional technical workshop

organizing a technical workshop with recognized experts to evaluate the current condition of hawksbill populations in the Wider Caribbean and Western Atlantic and present the best available methods of research and conservation for the species in its marine habitats.

Source:

1. Abreu-Grobis, F.A. V.Guzmán, E. Cuevas, M. Alba Gamio (compilers). 2005. *Memorias del Taller Rumbo a la OP3: Diagnóstico del estado de la tortuga Carey E.i. en la Península de Yucatán y determinación de acciones estratégicas*. SEMARNAT, CONANP, IFAW, PRONATURA-Península de Yucatán, WWF, Defenders of Wildlife. Xiv + 75 pp.

At the Fourteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES), a decision was made to collaborate with the IAC and SPAW Protocol to raise funds for this workshop and to encourage the participation of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and international aid agencies.

How Hawksbills Maintain Biodiversity of Coral Reefs, Secure Our Future & Our Safety:

1. Coral reefs, one of the Earth's most diverse living ecosystems, are often called the rainforest of the sea. Reefs provide homes and a nursery habitat for numerous fish and other species, and the livelihoods of millions around the globe depend on their health. They also provide coastal communities with protection from storms, wave damage and erosion — and may contain new and undiscovered biomedical resources!
2. Hawksbills play an important role in the health of the coral reefs by feeding on specific sponge populations which, if left unchecked, out-compete other species for space and nutrients, resulting in a loss of reef diversity and resilience.
3. Lower resilience to natural and anthropogenic threats (such as climate change, run-off, sedimentation and pollution) translates into impoverished coastal zones and fewer economic choices for coastal communities.
4. Without thriving reefs, fishers livelihoods fail and populated coastlines are at greater risk.

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