



To Whom It May Concern;

I am a marine researcher who has been working with sea turtles for over 25 years in Palm Beach County, Florida. In 2004, I initiated the Comprehensive Florida Hawksbill Research and Conservation Program (a.k.a Florida Hawksbill Project); the first and only long-term study of this species in Florida waters. Much like many SCUBA divers of the area before me, I became intrigued with the friendly and curious nature of the hawksbill turtles that were so frequently encountered on the reefs of Palm Beach. As a scientist, I realized that this unusual complacency toward divers could provide me with a pathway to study their abundance and distribution in these waters, and develop the basis for their future study and conservation elsewhere in the State.

Due to the logistical difficulties and expense of maintaining a research vessel, I approached a local dive charter operator to provide myself and my small team access to reef sites during their regular daily charters. This partnership developed quickly, and has since expanded to include most of the charter operators in the area. Their clients are thrilled to be joined by my team, and we very much enjoy the interaction with the diving community. Each of the divers who join us gain a new appreciation for this species and the work involved in their conservation, and have an opportunity to become 'citizen scientists' by reporting information about turtles they encounter in the future. With much appreciation from the dive charters, some now use this as their primary reason for diving on their boats.

Once each captured turtle is placed aboard the boat, they are carefully measured, sampled (small skin biopsies/ blood samples), tagged, and photographed using well-established methods. Basic information concerning their life-stage, gender, growth rate, health, and ecology can be gathered quickly and efficiently with little or no harm to the animal. Once tagged, each turtle becomes recognizable, allowing for their future identification. One of the most surprising results of the tagging program was the regularity with which many were repeatedly encountered by divers at or near their original capture site. A natural familiarity began to grow between the 'known' turtles and the dive community, many of which were named by the dive operators and their frequent clients. Conservation is very much about people's attitudes, and we have seen the difference in people when they see not just "a turtle", but "that turtle", which fosters in them an additional sense of stewardship. I have tagged nearly 200 hawksbills in this small area, and have since received hundreds of messages, photographs, and videos providing the tag numbers and whereabouts of the majority of these turtles, some now after even 10 years.

The sheer number of diver-generated tag reports (which require close-range underwater inspection) provided evidence that many of the hawksbills were residents. I became curious about whether they maintained some sort of territory, or 'home-range', and if so, how large it might be. To better understand their movement patterns, I embarked on a satellite tracking study that included six hawksbills that were well-known to the area. These individuals had been captured by my team several times over a number of years to determine their growth rates, and were among the most frequently encountered on the main reef sites. Even after experiencing several prior captures, each of these turtles was easily approached and brought to the surface for satellite tag deployment, and again for its removal at the end of the study. The data revealed that all six turtles stayed within territories that averaged only one-half of a square kilometer over nearly a year's deployment, confirming that resident hawksbills typically remain at or near a preferred site for extended periods of time, with or without prior interaction with our research team.

In most cases, sea turtles are fairly difficult to approach, making in-water studies surprisingly difficult. For whatever reasons, however, hawksbills in a number of locations have become quite accepting of human presence, making them favorites among divers seeking up-close underwater encounters. For decades, resident and tourist divers alike here in the Palm Beaches have been thrilled with their encounters with loggerheads, greens, and even leatherbacks, but none more engaging than with the resident hawksbills. One of the area's most famous divers; the late Ms. Norine Rouse, wrote extensively in her journals about the hawksbills she came to know over her 30+ years of diving Palm Beach. Before her death, she was so glad that I had begun the study that her daughters made sure these remarkable journals came into my possession after she passed, which carry a detailed history of her observations of the sea turtles of the Palm Beaches, some of which are now part of the study. I'm proud to carry on her legacy, and to finally draw attention to this under-represented species in Florida's ongoing efforts to protect sea turtles and the habitats in which they live.

From my experience, partnerships work. I encourage the business community to better understand the importance (and difficulties) of basic research in the conservation process, and I encourage scientists and researchers to better understand the potential consequences of their efforts on that same community. In the end, however, for one reason or another, everyone seems to want these turtles around, so it makes sense to work together to achieve this common goal.

Lawrence D. (Larry) Wood Ph.D.
Florida Hawksbill Project at the
National Save The Sea Turtle Foundation
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, USA



**THE COMPREHENSIVE FLORIDA
HAWKSBILL RESEARCH AND
CONSERVATION PROGRAM**
WWW.FLORIDAHAWKSBILLS.COM