



HAWAIIAN  
HAWKSBILL  
SEA TURTLES

A species struggling to survive







## A SPECIES STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE

*Hawksbill and green sea turtles occur in coastal waters of Hawai'i. Both species are protected from harm under state and federal laws, and while the green turtle population has increased, the hawksbill turtle population has not. Why have hawksbills not responded to conservation efforts and protections over the past 40 years? This is a topic of active monitoring, research and investigation.*

### Status: A Small and Isolated Population

- Hawksbill sea turtles are listed as "endangered" under the 1973 Endangered Species Act.
- The population has yet to show signs of recovery from intense overexploitation and harvest for its shell.
- The age of first reproduction (sexual maturity) is approximately 20 to 29 years. This delayed age of maturity likely affects the population's slow growth rate.
- Only 20 to 25 hawksbill females nest each year in Hawai'i. In contrast, 500 to 800 Hawaiian green turtles nest annually.
- Because this population is isolated from all other hawksbills in the Pacific Ocean, protecting Hawaiian hawksbills and their nests is critical to their continued survival.

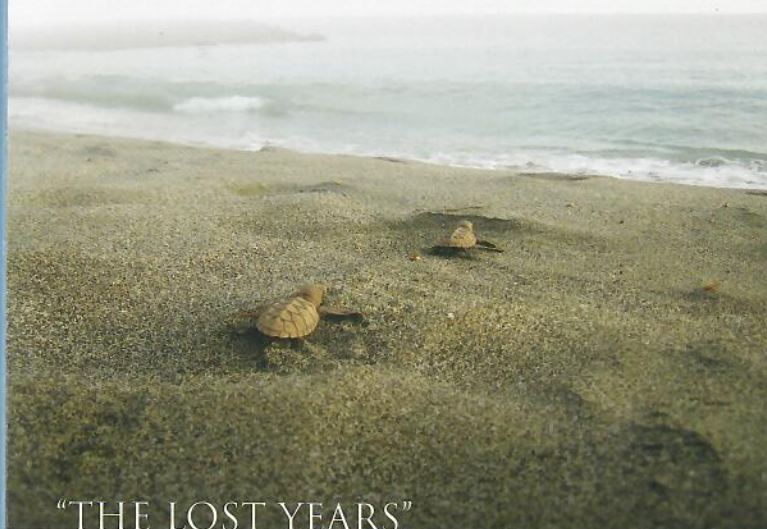
## SEA TURTLES IN HAWAIIAN CULTURE

As indigenous species in Hawai'i, sea turtles play an important role in Hawaiian cultural traditions and mo'olelo (stories).



Honu'ea (hawksbill turtle) and honu (green turtle) are mentioned in the fourth verse of the Kumulipo, the Hawaiian creation chant. Some families continue to revere sea turtles as their 'aumākua, spiritual guardian.

Traditionally, sea turtles were incorporated into native practices, religious ceremonies, and diet. 'Ea shells were prized for the making of fish hooks, tools, medicine, and tortoiseshell jewelry. Harvest was regulated by traditional management practices of the kapu (cultural rules) prohibition system enacted by Chiefs or Ali'i.



### "THE LOST YEARS"

The first few years of a sea turtle's life are a mystery. Once hatchlings leave the nesting beach, their movement patterns, habitats, growth rates, and diets are poorly understood. Eventually, they navigate back to Hawaiian coastal habitats as small juveniles to mature and continue their life cycle. Scientists estimate that less than 1% of sea turtle hatchlings reach adulthood.





## HAWKSBILL FAQs

- The species is named after their narrow and pointed hawk-like beak.
- Adults can be about 3 feet in shell length and weigh 250 pounds (a little smaller than green turtles).
- Adults can hold their breath for up to three hours while resting, but typically surface every 15 to 30 minutes to breathe.
- Hawksbills depend on healthy coral reef habitats and feed primarily on sponges, invertebrates (like crabs), and algae.
- Primary foraging habitats appear to be along the Hāmākua coast of Hawai'i Island and the waters of west Maui.
- Primary nesting beaches occur along the south Ka'ū coast of Hawai'i island, south Maui, and eastern Moloka'i.
- The nesting/hatching season spans May to December.
- Adult females may nest every 2 to 8+ years, returning to the same geographic location where they hatched.
- Each female can lay 1 to 6 nests in a season, about 20 days apart.
- Each clutch (nest) of eggs contains an average of 180 eggs that incubate for about two months depending on temperature.
- Incubation temperature of the nest determines a hatchling's gender. Warmer nests produce females and cooler nests produce males.
- Hatchlings typically emerge from the nest at night and find the ocean by crawling towards the brighter, open horizon.

Image above: Sea turtle nesting track

## HAWKSBILL OR GREEN?

Both species occur in Hawaiian waters, yet hawksbill turtles are rare. Learn to identify the difference and report any hawksbill sightings to NOAA or [RespectWildlife@noaa.gov](mailto:RespectWildlife@noaa.gov).

### Hawksbill / Honu'ea

*Eretmochelys imbricata*



- Narrow head and pointed beak



- 4 pre-frontal scales (between eyes)



- Shell: serrated edges



- Hatchlings are all brown

### Green / Honu

*Chelonia mydas*



- Rounded head



- 2 pre-frontal scales (between eyes)



- Shell: smooth edges



- Hatchlings are dark gray with a white trim on flippers



# SEA TURTLE REPORTING INFORMATION

**NOAA's state-wide marine animal reporting  
hotline for sea turtles, monk seals,  
dolphins, and whales:**

**(888) 256-9840**

**For illegal or suspicious activity that may  
result in turtle injury or death, contact:**

**DOCARE: (808) 643-DLNR (3567)**

**NOAA OLE: 1-800-853-1964**

**RespectWildlife@noaa.gov**

Photo credits: D. McLeish, C. King, NOAA Fisheries, JIMAR/NOAA, HAVO

## Hawai'i Hawksbill Sea Turtle Partners



Pūlama Lānaʻi







## PRIMARY THREATS TO SURVIVAL

- **Coastal development** and beach armoring can damage or reduce the quality of nesting and foraging habitats.
- **Accidental bycatch** in recreational shore-based fisheries (hook & line, crab trap, and gillnet) can entangle, injure or kill turtles.
- **Beach fires and bright light** may scare away or discourage nesting females and will disorient hatchlings. Remember, "Turtles Dig the Dark!"
- **Nesting beach obstructions** from vegetation, trash, debris, and tire ruts can block suitable nesting habitat and trap or entangle hatchlings.
- **Marine debris** can entangle turtles or can be ingested if mistaken for food.
- **Predators** include crabs, birds, mongoose, cats, dogs, rats, pigs, fish, and sharks.
- **Climate change and sea level rise** may affect habitats, sex ratios, nesting success, and hatchling survival.
- **Other threats** include boat strikes, urban/agricultural run-off, illegal hunting, and human disturbance.



## YOU CAN HELP!

- **Report ALL hawksbill turtles to NOAA** via reporting numbers. Send photos to: [www.HIhawksbills.org](http://www.HIhawksbills.org).
- **View turtles from a distance of 10 feet (3 meters).** In Hawai'i, we view turtles respectfully. Give turtles space and do not feed, chase or touch.
- **"No white light at night."** Use wildlife friendly lighting near the coast (yellow/amber and shielded lights). Keep lights and beach fires to a minimum from May to December when turtles are nesting and hatchlings are emerging.
- **Avoid beach driving.** Off-road vehicles crush nests, create tire ruts that trap hatchlings, and degrade habitats.
- **Prevent debris and rubbish from entering the ocean.** Participate in beach and reef cleanup activities.
- **Volunteer** with a monitoring and conservation program. Contact Hawai'i Hawksbill Sea Turtle Partners for details.

