

# Hawksbill Sea Turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*



**Family:** *Chelonidae*

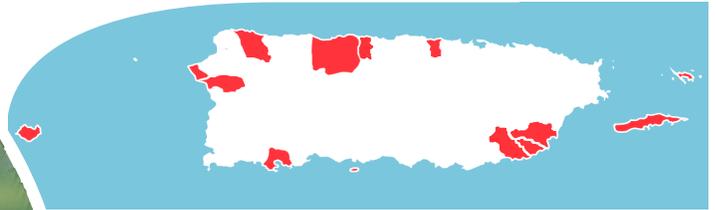
**Order:** *Chelonia (Testudinata)*

## Description

The hawksbill sea turtle is one of the four sea turtles that visit our tropical waters. It can grow to a length of 3 feet (approx. 1 meter), and weigh 300 pounds (136 kilograms). Its shell is oval-shaped and elongated, and it is the most beautiful of sea turtle shells. The shell is made up of brown and yellow scutes, or plates, that overlap each other like roof tiles; that is to say, imbricate. Its head and flippers are yellow with brown spots. The hawksbill sea turtle is the only sea turtle that has two pairs of prefrontal scales between the eyes, and their upper jaw is sharp like a hawk's. This turtle, like all other sea turtles, cannot hide its head or its extremities under its shell.

## Biological Information

The hawksbill, like all other marine and terrestrial turtles, is a reptile; it has lungs and breathes air, which means that it must come to the surface to breathe



Distribution

every few minutes. Sea turtles can dive and reach great depths. During particularly long dives, whether they are sleeping or resting, these turtles can reduce their oxygen consumption; in this manner, they can remain underwater for several hours without drowning.

## Reproduction

Sea turtles take many years to reach sexual maturity. In the Caribbean, it is estimated that hawksbill turtles take 20 years or more to reach sexual maturity and begin reproducing. Nesting season for hawksbill sea turtles in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean begins in April and ends by November. The majority of nesting events, however, happens during August. Studies have shown that hawksbill sea turtles can nest several times and in different locations during the same season, with an interval of 14 days between each nesting event. Like other sea turtles, the hawksbill nests during the night, and can lay up to 140 eggs, although there have been nests in which 200 eggs have been found. The incubation period lasts approximately 60 days.

## Habitat

The hawksbill can usually be found in rocky areas, coral reefs and shallow coasts (less than 65 feet [approx. 20 meters] deep). Females dig their nests under beachside vegetation, unlike other sea turtles, which prefer to make their nests in bare areas in the sand.

## Diet

The hawksbill sea turtle lives near coral reefs, where it feeds primarily on sea sponges, algae, sea urchins, mollusks, shrimp and squid.

## Distribution

This sea turtle is widely distributed across the tropical

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waters of the world, and especially those near coral reefs and rocky formations along the shoreline. In Puerto Rico, this turtle species nests in the beaches of Guánica, Añasco, Rincón, Isabela, Arecibo, Barceloneta, Dorado, Humacao, Patillas, Yabucoa, Culebra, Vieques, Isla de Mona and Caja de Muertos Island.

## Threats

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Adult sea turtles have few natural predators. A natural predator for the species could be a large shark. Newly hatched sea turtles, however, have many predators: dogs, sea birds, crabs, fish, and other animals feed on the hatchlings. The hawksbill is an endangered species, due to their being captured as contraband and slaughtered for their beautiful shells, which are then illegally exported as raw material for jewelry-making purposes. Other threats include consumption of their eggs and flesh, and occasionally, use of their skin. The continuous development, modification, and illumination of beaches and places near their nesting areas keeps the turtles from using the beach to their advantage during their nesting season. The bright lighting on the beach at night can disorient females who are out to lay eggs, and can lead the hatchlings away from the sea and cause their deaths before they ever even reach the sea for the first time.

## Conservation Measures

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The hawksbill sea turtle is protected by federal and state law, as are all other sea turtle species. The hawksbill was listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1970. The beach areas in Mona, and the Resaca, Brava and Larga beaches in the Culebra municipality along with the adjacent cays (the beaches in Culebrita and the beaches on the south of Cayo Norte) were designated critical habitat for the species as well. The habitat designation made by USFWS goes from the average high-tide mark, to 150 meters inland. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has also designated the waters around Mona and Monito islands as critical habitat.

The Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, prohibits the killing, harassing, trapping, purchasing or selling any species, as well as parts and products derived from the species. However, there are still people who illegally harvest the eggs, kill the females when they come ashore to lay their eggs, and capture them while in the sea

using nets, slaughtering them for their meat and shell. Although these clandestine activities are hard to detect and control, there has been a governmental unification, and efforts have been made to arrest, prosecute and fine these poachers. Citizen education regarding the importance of observing the law and preserving the species that make up our natural heritage is vital for sea turtle protection and recovery.

To aid in the recovery of the species, the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) of Puerto Rico, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, private associations and citizens and volunteers have taken upon themselves the task of patrolling the beaches during nesting season. In this manner, they prevent the illegal capture and slaughter of nesting females as well as egg harvesting.

## References

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## Additional Information

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