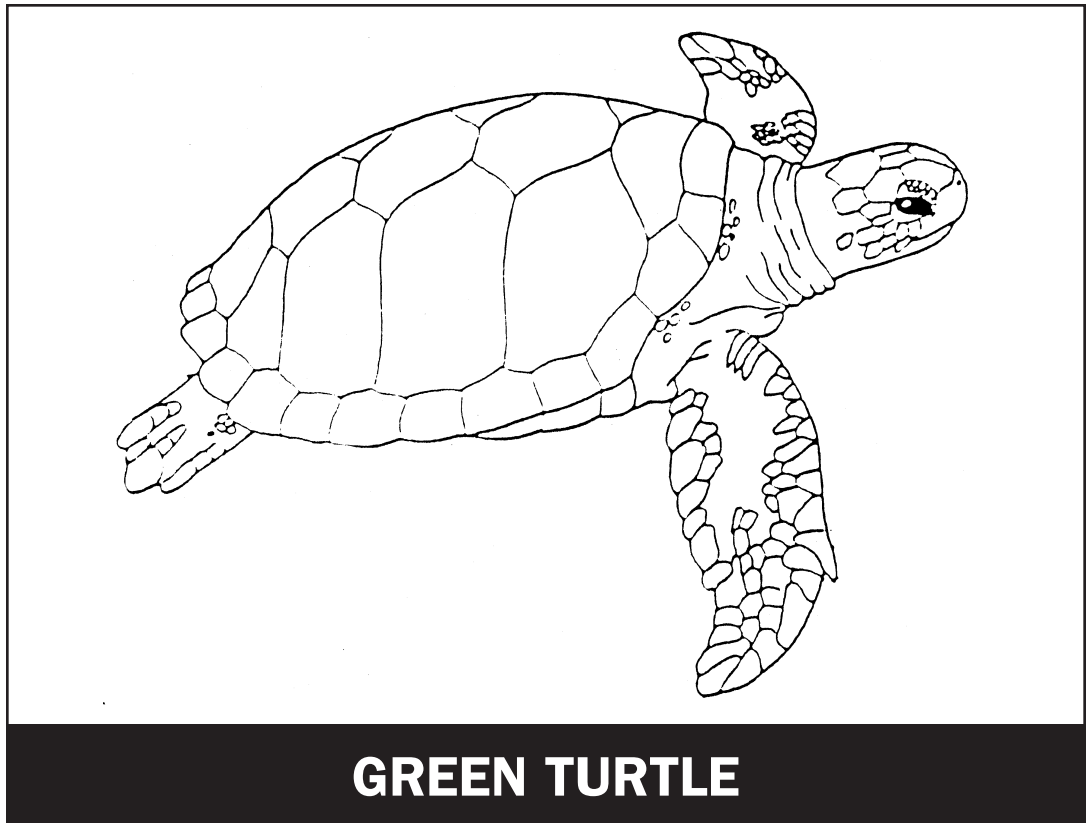




Endangered Species of The Bahamas



SCIENTIFIC NAME

Chelonia mydas

DESCRIPTION

Green turtles get their name because of the color of their body fat which gives the turtle its characteristic color. The *carapace* (the hard top shell) is mottled light to dark brown streaked with olive green. Adults can weigh between 200 to 500 pounds. Fairly long, flippers and an oval shell make Green turtles hydrodynamically suited to long-distance swimming. Green turtles and other sea turtles are reptiles.

DIET

Juvenile Green turtles are carnivorous (meat eating), until the age of six months to a year. However, adult Green turtles are largely vegetarian eating underwater grasses especially turtle grass (*Thalassia*) and sea weeds.

REPRODUCTION

Green turtles usually mate in the water. After mating, the female Green Turtle usually nests at night. She drags, herself out of the sea and onto a nesting beach, up beyond the reach of high tide. Using her hind flippers like shovels, she scoops out a bottle shaped hole and lays about one hundred white, leathery eggs that look like ping-pong balls. She covers, the nest with sand and returns to the sea, praying no further attention to it and never seeing her young.

The sun's ray heat the beach, warming the turtle eggs buried in the sand. Temperature will determine the sex of the young turtles. Females emerge from the eggs on top where warmer temperatures are found; males emerge from the bottom where cooler temperatures are found. The eggs develop in the nest and are ready to hatch in about

two months. Almost all must hatch at the same time, for they all must share the work of digging out from the nest. When the hatchlings are an inch or two below the surface of the beach they become quiet and wait for the surface temperature to drop indicating nightfall. Under the protection of darkness the baby turtles burst out of the nest and rush to the water. Phosphorescence, a light given off by organisms living in the sea, creates a glow that provides direction for these turtles as to the location of the ocean. The hatchling instinctively heads for this "bright" horizon. Tragically, in settled areas, hatchlings are now attracted to the bright lights of highways, hotels and parking lots and head away from the sea instead of towards it. They are usually killed. Thousands of hatchlings are lost this way each year.

HABITAT

Green turtles can be found in waters between 35 degrees north and 35 degrees south latitude, The major nesting beaches for Green sea turtles in the Wider Caribbean are in Costa Rica, Aves Island off Venezuela, and in Surinam. They also nest in many other places including The Bahamas.

STATUS

The Green turtle has suffered great decline and is very endangered throughout its range. The world total for all remaining populations of green turtles may be fewer than 500,000. Green turtles are listed in Appendix 1 of the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES), meaning that they are near extinction or very endangered, Unfortunately, Green turtles can still be harvested in The Bahamas during open Season (August 1 - March 31),

THREATS

Commercial use: While all sea turtles have edible meat, the Green turtle is favored as the source of the best turtle meat for human consumption. Turtle cartilage, or calipee, used in the manufacture of clear turtle soup, is also obtained primarily from Green turtles, Turtle oil, used in cosmetics, is obtained primarily from Green turtles.

Incidental take: Adult turtles, are accidentally captured and frequently drowned in nets used for commercial fishing such as shrimps fishing.

Habitat destruction: Coastal development and resulting pollution is contributing to a decline in Green turtle and other sea turtle populations worldwide.

Natural threats: Adult sea turtles which are both fast and heavily armored have few natural enemies, although sharks can do great damage to them: Young sea turtles have many enemies - ants, crabs, dogs, raccoons, lizards, sometimes eat them immediately after hatching.

INTERESTING FACTS

- Green turtles are the most gentle of all sea turtles rarely attempting to bite, even if provoked
- Green turtles have good vision underwater, but are hopelessly nearsighted on land. They also have color vision and can see ultraviolet light.
- The taking of turtle eggs is prohibited by law in the Bahamas.
- Sea turtles sleep at night. While sleeping or resting, they can remain underwater for hours without breathing.



Sponsored by RBC Royal Bank of Canada

© 2008 The Bahamas National Trust, P. O. Box N-4105, Nassau, Bahamas