



Hawksbill Sea Turtle *Eretmochelys imbricate*

Federal Status: Endangered (June 2, 1970)

State Status: Endangered (December 20, 1989)

Description: The hawksbill is a medium—sized sea turtle often considered the most beautiful of all sea turtles because of the amber scutes on the carapace that are usually streaked with red-brown, black, and/or yellow. Additional distinctive characters include overlapping carapace scutes, except in very old individuals; a keel down the center of the carapace; 4 coastal scutes, the first not touching the nuchal; and 2

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pairs of prefrontal scales. One of the smaller sea turtles with adult shell length usually 76 - 89 cm (30-35 in). Adults usually weigh between 43 and 75 kg (100—165 lb) but may grow as large as 127 kg (280 lb). Frequents warm, shallow water habitats (less than 20 m [65 ft] in depth) such as bays, shoals, and coral reefs. Females lay several hundred eggs on exposed sand beach every 2 to 3 years. This species does not nest in distinct colonies as do most other sea turtles. It is considered an omnivore and eats a variety of plants and animals such as submergent vegetation, crustaceans, mollusks, jellyfish and sea urchins.

Habitat: Warm bays and shallow portions of oceans; seagrass beds; estuaries; mainland beaches and islands (nesting).

Distribution: Found in warm water regions worldwide. In Louisiana and other coastal regions of the Gulf of Mexico, this is one of the most infrequently encountered sea turtles. Because of its inclination to nest in small isolated areas, there are no reliable estimates of historic or current abundance.

Reasons for decline: Although this species has been harvested for meat and eggs, the primary reason for the decline was harvest for “tortoise shell.” As recently as 1991, Japan allowed importation of up to 20 tons of hawksbill turtle shell for their industry. However, recent pressure has caused the Japanese government to begin phasing out this industry. A recent trend to offer stuffed juvenile hawksbills as tourist curios continues to be a threat. Because this species tends to nest on small, isolated islands, loss of nesting habitat to development has not been as much of a threat as it has been with other sea turtles. Loss of coral reefs in tropical regions has had a serious effect because of loss of feeding areas. Erosion of barrier islands and other factors which decrease available seagrass beds have also been a factor in its decline. This species is considered one of the most endangered sea turtles.

Conservation efforts: Pressures to stop the trade on tortoise shell and stuffed, whole specimens is currently under way.



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