

Fact Sheet: Hawksbill Turtle

Region

North Coast, Gascoyne Coast

Summary

Hawksbill turtles are known to nest and feed at the Rowley Shoals which provides an oceanic refuge for these world travelers.

Scientific name

Eretmochelys imbricata

Places of interest

Rowley Shoals

Distribution

Worldwide throughout tropical, and some sub-tropical waters, in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Ecological suite

Marine Reptile

General description

Hawksbill turtles are known to nest and feed at the Rowley Shoals which provides an oceanic refuge for these world travellers. With the pristine corals reefs providing a plentiful supply of their favourite food, sponges, and the sheltered lagoons of the atolls providing a diet alternative, seagrass.

Not reproducing until 30 years of age, Hawksbill hatchlings spend the first stage of their life travelling the ocean currents, feeding on ocean drifters. Once they have reached around 20-30cm in length they move to more localised feeding arrangements, frequenting coral reefs and seagrass beds. They can undertake migrations over large distance, travelling between feeding and breeding grounds.

With the Western Australian coastline being home to the only large population of Hawksbills left in the Indian Ocean, the Rowley Shoals is an important habitat for this marine turtle.

Identifying features

- thick, overlapping scales
- beak-like, pointed mouth
- narrow head

Habitat

Hawksbill turtles prefer coral and rocky reefs in warm tropical waters, utilising sandy beaches during nesting time.

Distribution (WA)

From Exmouth to the Northern Territory border.

Colour

The shell of the Hawksbill is olive grey with brown, reddish brown and/or black markings.

Size

One of the smaller of the seven species of marine turtles, the shell of the Hawksbill can grow to 80cm with adult females weighing about 50kg.

Diet

Hawksbill turtles are omnivorous, feeding on both plants and animals. Favourites on the menu include sponges, soft corals, shellfish, sea squirts, seagrass and seaweed.

Exploitation

Hawksbill turtles have historically been heavily targeted for their shell – commonly known as the valuable ‘tortoiseshell’ once used in hairbrushes, jewellery and other ornaments. It is estimated that millions of Hawksbill turtles have been killed over the last century for use in the tortoiseshell trade.

Eggs from nesting females are also ‘harvested’ from many beaches across the world, particularly along Asian coastlines, resulting in fewer and fewer juveniles entering the population each year.

Worldwide, the Hawksbill turtle is listed as critically endangered by the IUCN due to the illegal harvest of adults and eggs that still continues. Australia however, it is listed as vulnerable due to strict protection of nesting habitats and enforcement of no harvest policies providing a refuge for this migratory species.

Safety/Edibility

Like all marine turtles, the Hawksbill poses no threat to humans. It is a docile and shy creature that will quickly dart away once it feels threatened by divers or snorkelers lucky enough to encounter it meandering over the reef, looking for its next meal.

As with most marine turtles, demand for the meat of the Hawksbill has resulted in heavy fishing

pressure around the world but in Australia the Hawksbill is a protected species under WA legislation.