

FIRST CITES WIDER CARIBBEAN HAWKSBILL TURTLE DIALOGUE MEETING IN MEXICO CITY, 15th-17th MAY 2001

NATIONAL REPORT

BAHAMAS

INTRODUCTION

The Bahamas is a coral archipelago consisting of some seven hundred (700) low-lying limestone islands, and over two thousand (2,000) cays (pronounced “keys”). The total land area of the islands is about 5,400 square miles. The whole archipelago extends for about 600 miles southeast from the Mantanilla Shoal off the coast of Florida to 50 miles north of Haiti. About fifteen (15) island areas have been developed. They have a total population of about three hundred thousand persons (300,000); about two thirds live in New Providence and sixteen (16%) percent in Grand Bahama. Most of the smaller cays are uninhabited. Nassau, the capital, is on New Providence Island. The other islands, known as the “Family Islands”, or “Out Islands”, include Bimini, the Berry Islands, Abaco, Eleuthera, the Exumas, Andros, Cat Island, Long Island, San Salvador, Rum Cay, Inagua, Acklins and Crooked Island.

SEA TURTLES SPECIES FOUND IN THE BAHAMAS

Five (5) species of sea turtles are known to occur in The Bahamas. These marine turtles are the Green turtle, Hawksbill turtle, Loggerhead turtle, Olive Ridley turtle and Leatherback turtle. The first three (3) are found commonly throughout the region where they feed in shallow waters, including shallow bays and creeks, coral reefs and heads. Green turtles feed on seagrass pastures, hawksbills on the extensive coral reefs and loggerheads over rocky and sandy areas of The Bahamas Archipelago. Small numbers of greens, hawksbills, loggerheads and leatherbacks nest on beaches around the country. One unconfirmed sighting of a Kemp's Ridley turtle has been reported in The Bahamas.

- 1.) The legal capturing of hawksbill turtles ceased in The Bahamas in 1986 when the harvesting of hawksbill turtles became illegal under the Fisheries Resources Jurisdiction and Conservation (Regulation);
- 2.) Hawksbill turtles are known to nest in several islands notably Abaco, Inagua, Acklins, Crooked Island and Conception Island;
- 3.) Research is conducted on the hawksbill turtles in Union Creek in Inagua;
- 4.) Two (2) arrests were made of persons found in possession of hawksbill turtles in year 2000;
- 5.) There are more reports of sightings suggesting an increase in the numbers of juvenile hawksbill turtles in several areas of The Bahamas;

- 6.) Tagging of hawksbill turtles have been conducted at Union Creek Inagua and several islands including Crooked Island, Conception Island, Rum Cay and San Salvador;
- 7.) Tags from released hawksbill turtles have reportedly been returned from Turks and Caicos Island and Cuba;
- 8.) The Bahamas joined CITES in 1979. A draft legislation with provisions for penalties and confiscation has been prepared and is awaiting enactment. At present, The Bahamas uses legislation from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries to implement the CITES provision;
- 9.) Penalty for the illegal harvesting of hawksbill turtles is that person(s) convicted of such offense becomes liable to a fine of up to three thousand (\$3,000.00) dollars or to imprisonment for a term of one (1) year or both. Where a person is found guilty of such an offense, the court may order the confiscation of all gears used to commit the offense;
- 10.) A revised Fisheries Act and Fisheries is awaiting enactment. The new laws will extend greater protection of marine turtles including the leatherback turtles and ridley turtles presently not covered under the existing regulations;
- 11.) Overall landings of marine turtles have declined greatly. This is believed to be because fishers have shifted their efforts towards capturing resources of greater economic importance such as spiny lobsters and scalefish;
- 12.) The Bahamas has massive shallow banks which is believed to be the ideal foraging habitat for turtles which supports the numerous reports of turtle sightings;
- 13.) Protection of the coastal zone and mangrove areas is the responsibility of the Department of Physical Planning.
- 14.) Emphasis of government has been the encouragement of environmentally sound development whereby persons wishing to develop in the coastal zone must submit an Environment Impact Assessment study for evaluation;
- 15.) There is no known stockpile of hawksbill shells awaiting sale or disposal. All stockpiles were disposed off in the mid – 1980's;
- 16.) Arrested foreign vessels poaching in The Bahamas have been found with dead hawksbill turtles as a part of its catch;
- 17.) Two local marine aquariums have released dozens of loggerhead and green turtle hatchlings that were born in captivity to the marine environs towards the increasing of the population of those species.
- 18.) The Bahamas is seeking to create a number of Marine Protected Areas (MPA) with one of the objectives being that Marine Protected Areas would offer a safe area against the capture of marine turtles and additionally the protection of rookery sites.

NATIONAL MANAGEMENT PLANS AND RECOVERY EFFORTS

- 1.) A meeting is scheduled for later this year between the Governments of The Bahamas and Cuba involving matters including research.
- 2.) In future, The Bahamas will develop a map showing areas of poaching and apprehension of marine products including sea turtles;
- 3.) The Bahamas has created a booklet on sea turtles called “Marine Turtles of The Bahamas” providing information as to the identification of marine turtles and the local laws governing them;
- 4.) In future, The Bahamas plans to map and protect critical habitats of sea turtles including nesting beaches and foraging sites by using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology;
- 5.) The Bahamas intends to pursue the development of the Sea Turtle Recovery Action Plan once funding has been identified.