

Netherlands Antilles

Hawksbill turtles, outline of present situation

The Hawksbill turtle population in the Netherlands Antilles is small. No more than a handful of nests are found on average yearly on each of the islands of the NA.

The NA have committed themselves to sustainable development and sustainable use of their resources. They realized that the remnant sea turtle populations still present around the islands were an important resource for sustainable use, but considering the small numbers left only non-extractive use could be considered, as opposed to consumptive use. This also made sense from the principle that with consumptive use sea turtles are only worth their weight according to the going rate per kilogram of meat, whereas with non-extractive use each turtle is worth its weight in gold as it cumulatively brings in revenue from eco-tourism.

The turtles in the NA probably comprise two different populations, one around the islands of Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten in the lesser Antilles, including the large shallow water area of the SabaBank, a 1600 km² area of sand, rocky bottom covered with fleshy brown algae known to be foraging ground to green turtles, and extensive coral reefs, probably foraging area to many hawksbill turtles.

Very little is known about the bank, least of all about its turtle population.

The second population is located around the islands of Bonaire and Curaçao. These islands have highly developed coral reefs. The population of hawksbills around these islands is probably contiguous or identical to the population of the North coast of Venezuela and perhaps Colombia.

Committed to the conservation and restoration of sea turtles, the NA were among the first countries to prepare a STRAP (Sea Turtle Recovery Action Plan) in 1992. The NA are party to a number of treaties, viz. CBD, CMS, Ramsar, and most relevant to sea turtle conservation: CITES, the SPAW protocol of the Cartagena Convention and the IAC. All these treaties were ratified or acceded to, and implemented in the National Nature Conservation Ordinance, in such a way that where different treaties overlap, the most strict requirements take precedence. In this way no conflicts are possible.

The upshot of this is that Hawksbill and other turtles are fully protected, no hunting, possession, disturbing or other deleterious acts are allowed, except for the exceptions as provided in the respective treaties, again with the strictest requirements taking precedence..

The NA is lucky in that it does not have any communities dependent on sea turtles for their subsistence. It is also lucky in that over the last decade, NGO's have done a great job in raising public awareness to a level where there is general support for strict protection of turtles on most islands.

Three of the five islands have now established well managed Marine Parks, while the remaining two islands, Curaçao and St. Maarten are expected to do so as well in the near future..

Curaçao does have a protected area comprised of the most frequently visited nesting beaches of the island.

Bonaire has recently secured the island of Klein Bonaire for conservation, to be managed by the Bonaire Marine Park. Klein Bonaire is the most important nesting area for Bonaire turtles.

This situation makes enforcement of protection of sea turtles easier, though it is still far from perfect, poaching is still going on.

Present goals

The government is working to ensure the continued existence of the management organizations now in place in all the islands, but which have difficulty in remaining alive due to lack of funding. The continued existence of these organizations is absolutely necessary for adequate enforcement of turtle protection.

The government is also working to increase public awareness/support for nature conservation in general and sea turtles in particular.

The government aims at collecting more data on sea turtle populations, especially with regards to the Saba Bank area.

Finally we would like to point out to this meeting that enforcement is always difficult. It can be made easier however by having international examples to point to, to be able to point to other countries that are also protecting their sea turtles. This makes it much easier to explain to people that protection is really necessary, and not just something the local government thought up.

If, elsewhere trade in sea turtles is allowed, e.g because the local population there can support it, but before most of other populations are sufficiently recovered to some level to be agreed on, it will be impossible to explain to local fishermen why they are still not allowed to catch turtles, while their colleagues elsewhere are. They will have enormous trouble to understand that the local population will not support this.