

What you need to know about HAWKSBILL TURTLES



Photo by Karenne Tun

What are they?

Hawksbill Turtles are sea turtles. They have brown shells which are strikingly coloured with irregular yellow and orange mottles. The upper jaw of the Hawksbill Turtle protrudes far beyond the lower one, giving its mouth the distinctive beak-like shape from which it gets its name. Another distinctive characteristic of the Hawksbill Turtle is that there are claws on its front flippers, unlike other sea turtles.

Distribution & Habitat

Hawksbill Turtles can be found in the tropical waters of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. They avoid deep waters, preferring shallow coral reefs. They have been regularly sighted along the Singapore Strait. Females have also been spotted coming ashore at East Coast Park to lay eggs.

Behaviour

The Hawksbill Turtle is carnivorous, feeding mainly on sponges and crustaceans. Hawksbill Turtles usually mate every two to three years. The female turtle then chooses a sandy beach to lay her eggs. This is usually done under the cover of the night. The female turtle can lay up to 200 eggs at a time. The eggs usually hatch after two months. The hatchlings instinctively head for the open sea. The journey between the nest and the sea is a short but dangerous one, as the baby turtles are preyed upon by shorebirds and crabs along the way.

Did you know?

Hawksbill Turtles have been affected by sea pollution and loss of nesting beaches to reclamation and other land uses. Many of them have died after being accidentally caught in fishing nets. The Hawksbill Turtle is internationally acknowledged as a critically endangered species. Despite this, poachers continue to hunt the Hawksbill Turtle for its attractive shell. Some people illegally dig up the eggs to cook and eat them. Hatchlings have also been known to be sold on the black market as aquarium pets.

What should you do if you encounter a nesting turtle?

- ✓ **Call NParks at 1800-4717300.**
- ✓ **Keep your distance from the turtle and the eggs.**
Touching the turtle may scare or provoke it. Handling the eggs may damage them, or introduce bacteria into the nest.
- ✓ **Talk softly and stay out of sight. Do not shine lights at the turtle or use flash photography.**
Light and noise may scare the turtle, and cause it to leave without laying any eggs.
- ✓ **Keep clear of tracks left by the turtle.**
Researchers use the tracks to identify the species of the turtle and to locate the nest.