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PRESENTS

HAWKSBILL SEA TURTLE

Eretmochelys imbricata

The hawksbill sea turtle belongs to the Cheloniidae family, which includes the turtle species with a hard shell. Hawksbills prefer hard bottom habitats, like coral reefs and rocky reefs, as well as mangrove estuaries. Globally, this species is critically endangered since the number of nesting females has decreased 80% in the last 100 years.

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TAXONOMY

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Reptilia
Order: Testudines
Family: Cheloniidae
Genus: *Eretmochelys*
Species: *E. imbricata*

NOM-059 SEMARNAT — P — ENDANGERED

Conservation status:
• Nom 059 – **P** (endangered)
• IUCN-**CR** (critically endangered)

Distribution: Tropical waters of the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans. In Mexico, they are found in the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean.

Diet: Omnivorous. Some of their preferred food items are sponges, tunicates, algae, jellyfish, crustaceans, and mangrove roots.

Reproduction: Hawksbills reach sexual maturity at the age of 20 to 35 years. Adults are sexually dimorphic.

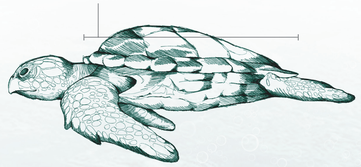
Predators: Eggs and hatchlings are consumed by seabirds, crabs, racoons, and feral dogs. At sea, their main predators are large fish like mahi-mahi, sharks, and crocodiles.

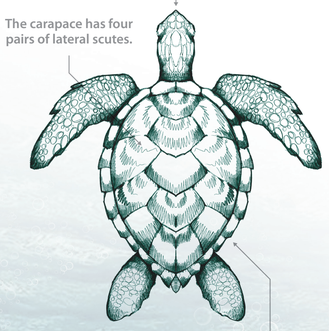
ANATOMY

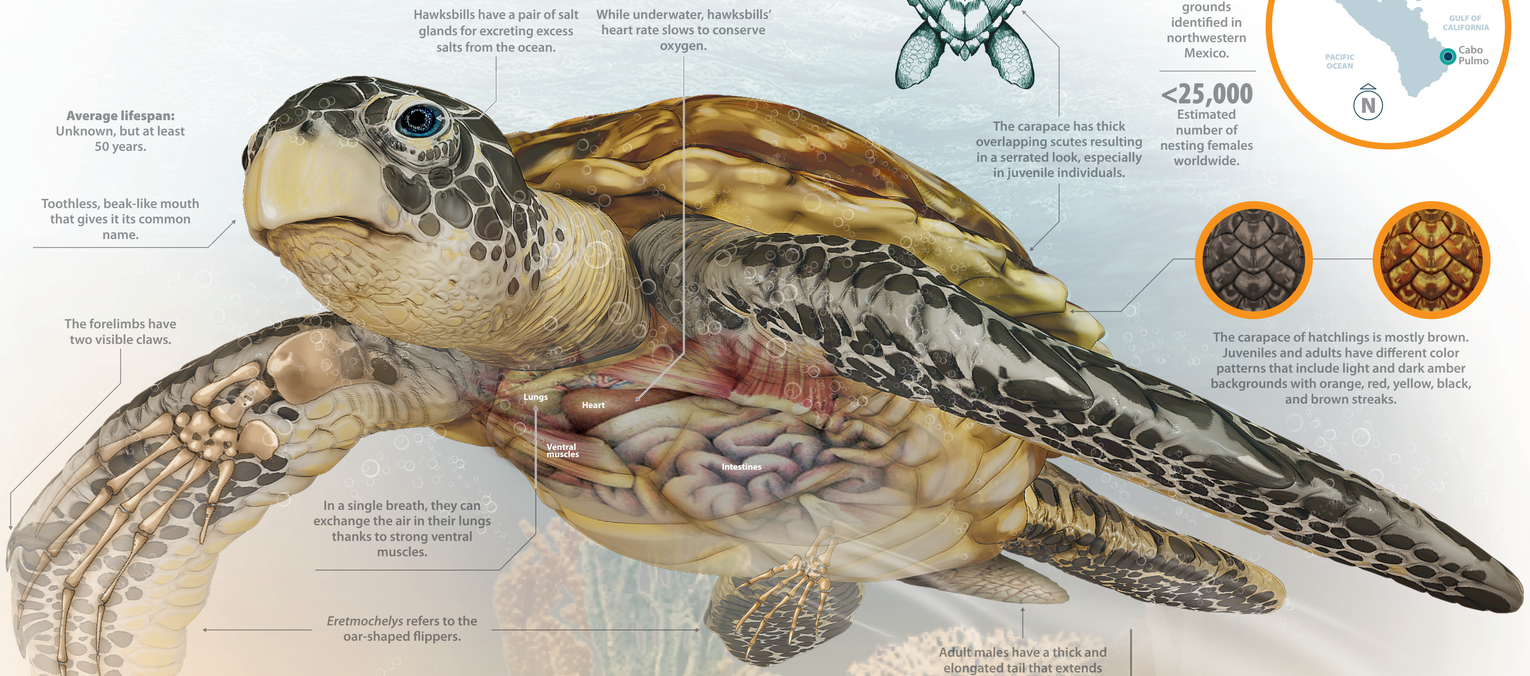
Hawksbill sea turtles spend most of their lives in the ocean and their bodies are adapted to this environment: their carapace is oval-shaped and flat to be hydrodynamically efficient.

Average adult size: **24 to 42 inches long**

Average adult weight: **100 to 150 pounds**







The carapace of hatchlings is mostly brown. Juveniles and adults have different color patterns that include light and dark amber backgrounds with orange, red, yellow, black, and brown streaks.

DISTRIBUTION

There are 13 populations of hawksbill sea turtles living in tropical and subtropical regions of the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans. The Eastern Pacific population, which includes the individuals that move between Mexico and Peru, is considered the most threatened of all with less than 600 nesting females.

The Gulf of California and the Pacific coast of Baja California Sur are the northernmost limit of its distribution. Some of the most important feeding grounds for juveniles are located here.

BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR, MEXICO

+50 Foraging grounds identified in northwestern Mexico.

<25,000 Estimated number of nesting females worldwide.

THREATS

Illegal shell trade.

In Mexico, hawksbills are captured for their shell, meat, and eggs. There is also a trade of stuffed individuals, considered a sign of good fortune.

Incidental and illegal capture, egg and nest poaching, coastal development, and pollution in nesting and feeding grounds.

Extreme temperatures in nesting beaches caused by climate change.

9 million estimated number of individuals harvested between 1844 and 1992 for the global shell trade.

ECOLOGICAL ROLE

Help control the animal and algae populations they feed on.

Transport nutrients from foraging grounds to nesting sites during migrations.

Provide nutrients to coastal vegetation and decomposers from eggs and hatchlings left behind.

REPRODUCTION

Nesting season varies by location, but in general occurs between April and November.

Females migrate to nesting sites every 2 to 5 years.

Mating occurs in the water. Females lay between 3 to 5 clutches with over a hundred eggs each.

The egg incubation averages 50 to 60 days. Sex is determined by the nest's temperature.
>84ºF more females
<84ºF more males

BEHAVIOR

Hawksbills are ectotherms, so they have preference for coastal habitats with shallow waters. They also float at the surface to regulate their body temperature.

Hawksbills are air breathers but can remain underwater for several hours.

CONSERVATION TIMELINE

1968: Hawksbills are listed on the IUCN red list of threatened species. Mexico establishes regulations for sea turtle capture, use, and trade.

1971: Sea turtle capture and trade is banned for two years in Mexico.

1972: Sea turtle capture and trade is allowed for fishing cooperatives in Mexico.

1975: Hawksbills are included in CITES: The Atlantic Ocean population is listed in Appendix I, and the Indo-Pacific populations in Appendix II.

1977: All hawksbill populations are included in Appendix I of CITES.

1990: National moratorium prohibiting their use and trade in Mexico. Hawksbills are enlisted on the NOM-059 of endangered species.

1991: The capture, killing, and possession of any sea turtle species is classified as a federal crime in Mexico.

1993: Mexico establishes the national committee for the protection and conservation of sea turtles.

2008: Conservation efforts for the Eastern Pacific population are renewed after discovering important nesting sites in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

2012: The National Action Program for the Species Conservation (PACE, in Spanish) is published in Mexico.

Credits:
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