

Getting to know our sea turtles

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THE islands of Trinidad and Tobago are blessed with a great diversity of flora and fauna attributed to them once being part of the South American continent breaking off approximately 1,600 years ago, and their isolation resulting in the development of endemic species.

However, our twin islands are not only home to a wide variety of species but also at least a temporary home to a number of migrant species. A well-known example is the Leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) which uses our beaches as a nesting area and attracting both locals and visitors alike. However,

Tobago is home to two other less popular species of sea turtles, Green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) and Hawksbills (*Eretmochelys imbricata*). However, I am a firm believer that a little knowledge goes a long way in getting one interested in all the biodiversity around us and not just a few popular ones. So in the following paragraphs I have included some basic information on all three of these sea turtle species including how to identify them, their biology, habitat as well as the threats they face in our environment.

In Trinidad, Leatherbacks nest on the beaches of Matura, Grand Rivere and Fishing Pond to name a few. While on Tobago, Leatherbacks nest on the beaches in the Black Rock, Black Bay, Grafton and Turtle Beaches, with hawksbills typically occupying the waters around the coral reefs in the northwest part

of the island and Greens around the sea grass beds surrounding the island.

The Leatherback turtle cops the title of largest living species of turtle reaching lengths of 2½ metres and weighing up to 680 kg. It is given this name as it does not possess a hard shell as with other turtle species but rather a series of bony plates covered with a leathery skin. Also this species cannot withdraw into its carapace as it has a lot of fatty tissue which keeps it warm in the cold ocean waters.

Over 80% of the nesting populations of Leatherbacks in the insular Caribbean Sea nest on Trinidad beaches. We also host the second largest nesting colony of this species in the world. However, this species once numbered over 75,000 but has now dwindled to less than 1,000. In Trinidad and Tobago

their nesting season usually lasts between March and August.

Hawksbill turtles are so called because their mouth (referred to as a beak) is shaped like that of a hawk. They are mainly found in the tropic regions of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans; in waters not exceeding 18 metres in depth, where they frequent reefs with sponges. These are relatively small turtles, weighing 80 kg and measuring 87 cm in length. Individuals of this species are brown with colourful carapaces having splashes of orange, yellow or reddish-brown. However, the males have long claws, a thicker tail and brighter colouration than the females. The females usually nest between April to November, and after about 60 days hatchlings will emerge from their nests and make their way to the ocean. Young turtles live on masses of floating sea plants as they cannot dive deep, and have a heart-shaped carapace which becomes more elongate as they mature.

Green turtles on the other hand have a more flattened body with a teardrop-shaped carapace. However, they are not named for their body colour which is light coloured with a carapace ranging from black to olive brown. Rather it is so named because of the green colour of its body fat attributed to its vegetarian diet.

Where this species is found depends on what life stage it is at, with adults frequenting sea grass beds in shallow or coastal waters. Hatchlings and juveniles (up to 5 years old) spend most of their life in shallow waters in the convergence zones within the open ocean. However, gravid females come ashore to lay their eggs between June and September, every two to four years on the same beaches they were born.

Their diet is just as variable as their habitats, with hatchlings being carnivores, and juveniles and adults acting as grazers.

However, one thing all these sea turtle species have in common is that they face a myriad of threats both in the sea and on land. In the



ocean these animals can get tangled in used or abandoned fishing gear or plastic. In the case of Leatherback turtles they may eat plastic bags drifting in the water as it resembles their preferred food – jellyfish. The bags get stuck in their throats causing them to suffocate. But they are also subject to natural threats such as from predators like sharks. Hatchlings face predators like stray dogs, crabs, lizards and shorebirds.

However, one of the most serious threats is from humans who hunt these animals for their meat, eggs and shells. These animals are also the victims of much abuse by humans when they come on shore to nest, mostly towards Leatherbacks. Much of the abuse against these gentle giants have been documented in photos in the national newspapers last month showing individuals riding or standing on their carapaces, as they nest. This usually results in subsequent death of these animals as this crushes their vertebrate since they lack a hard carapace like other turtles as previously mentioned.

I hope that this article has expanded your knowledge on the marine fauna found most or some of the time in our waters, as well as some of the threats they face.

Port Authority Of Trinidad And Tobago



TENDER NOTICE

Tender For The Construction Of Accommodation For Tenants (Government Shipping Service, Tobago)

1. The Port Authority of Trinidad & Tobago (PATT) hereby invites Tenders for the Construction of Accommodation for Tenants at Government Shipping Service (GSS), Tobago.
2. Tender Documents may be obtained during the hours of 8.00 am to 4.00 pm from **Friday, 2009 July 03.**

The Port Secretary
2nd Floor, PATT Administration Building
Dock Road

Executive Secretary
GSS Terminal
Scarborough