



FACT SHEET: SEA TURTLES OF PALAU



Turtles around the World

There are seven species of sea turtles in the world: the hawksbill, green, leatherback, loggerhead, olive ridley, kemp's ridley and flatback turtles. These turtles live and nest throughout the world's warm tropical and sub-tropical regions; however, the loggerhead and leatherbacks can also be found in cooler climates.

Once abundant throughout the world's oceans, more and more biologists have begun to notice dramatic worldwide declines in turtle populations in the past century. As a result of this decline, various species-monitoring organizations and agencies have classified most turtle species as being threatened with extinction; the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has classified all turtles as "endangered" and turtles are included on the "most endangered" listing (Appendix 1) of the Endangered Species Trade Convention (CITES).

Turtles in Palau

The most common species of turtles in Palau are the hawksbill and green sea turtle, and are the only two species that nest on beaches in Palau. Other species, such as the leatherback, loggerhead and olive ridley, occasionally pass through Palau's waters. Turtles are used in Palau as a source of food and are important in the Palauan traditions and culture.

Green turtles, or *melob*, can be found anywhere in Palau. Nesting occurs in low numbers in Palau's main islands, but is especially high on Merir in the Southwest Islands, and Ngeruangel in Kayangel. Green turtles eat mainly sea grasses and algae and can grow as large as 47 inches long and weigh 400 pounds. Green turtles can live to

be as old as humans but wait 20-35 years to lay eggs. They are generally between 32 and 27 inches in shell size before they begin to nest.

Hawksbill turtles (*ngasech*) are also found in Palau but tend to nest in the Rock Islands. They can grow to about 37 inches and weigh 145 pounds, surviving mostly on a diet of sponges. The size at first nesting for a Hawksbill is generally between 23 and 29 inches. The hawksbill is valued mostly for its thick shell.

To lay their eggs, Green Sea turtles and Hawksbill turtles migrate, between 2 and 8 years after their last breeding, from distant foraging grounds to nest on the beaches where they were born. These turtles nest 3-5 times during a nesting year, separated by 13-15 days. Generally the green turtle will lay about 100 eggs (the hawksbill will lay about 130 eggs) per nest, although these numbers can vary. Estimations indicate between 1 and 10 eggs out of the 1,000 will survive to adulthood.

Knowledgeable sources indicate that both the Green Sea Turtles and Hawksbill Turtles have declined significantly throughout Palau. It is estimated that nesting populations of green turtles have declined to a little more than 125 females, and as few as 20 nesting female Hawksbill turtles, a year. In favorable conditions, between 50 and 60 female Hawksbill turtles will nest. Although Palauans have followed many rules regarding turtles and have tried to use turtles within the cultural setting, local interviews with fishermen and officials indicate that the average sizes and nesting numbers of turtles have significantly decreased in the past 30-50 years. Fortunately, experts in turtle decline have offered many observations and suggestions which may be useful in helping to improve this situation.

