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VANUATU ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE SOCIETY

Threatened Species Factsheet No. 18

HAWKSBILL TURTLE

What are they called?

Scientific: *Eretmochelys imbricata*

Common English: Hawksbill turtle

French: Tortue Caret

Bislama: Hawksbill Totel

Vernacular: Many communities don't have a specific name for this species but call them "small turtles".

A little bit about them:

They are marine reptiles native to Vanuatu. Seaturtles are large animals, but Hawskbills are the smallest seaturtles found in Vanuatu. They have an average weight of 60-80kg and their shell is about 90cm long.

They eat lots of marine animals including sponges, soft corals, jellyfish, sea urchins and crabs.

Hawksbills grow slowly and can take 20-35 years before females can lay eggs. They live in the sea but come on land to lay their eggs every 2-3 years.

Hawksbill turtles are found throughout Vanautu.

What do they look like?

Hawksbill Turtles are named for their pointed hooked beak. They have small and narrow heads, dark brown in colour. Their shells are bright and shiny, a mixture of reddish brown and light colours in attractive spots and line patterns. Their shell also has a jagged edge and overlapping, rough scales. They have 4 small scales between their eyes which is useful to tell them apart from Green Turtles.

Hatchlings are very small and brown, with jagged edges on their shells as well.

Did you know?

- Females lay between 70 – 220 eggs in each nest!
- Female seaturtles return to their birthplace to lay their eggs, often they cross oceans to get there.

Hawksbill Turtles are classified as Critically Endangered (CR) on the IUCN Red List.

Why are they threatened?

- These turtles are illegally hunted to eat and for their attractive shell, used for jewelry and other crafts.
- Egg are eaten by people, pigs, cats and dogs.
- Being strangled and drowning in fishing nets.
- Pollution such as plastic bags which they can confuse with food.
- Loss of nesting beaches.

What do they do for us?

- They keep coral reefs healthy. As they are one of the only species who can eat tough sponges, they control their population.
- This allows corals to grow and the whole ecosystem to survive, including fish and crustaceans that humans like to look at and eat.
- They create tourism opportunities as people like to see Hawksbill Turtles in their natural environment.

What can we do for them?

- ✓ Use fishing gear that does not catch seaturtles by accident.
- ✓ Leave nesting turtles alone, do not remove their eggs and stop harvesting of adults for their shells and meat.
- ✓ Avoid using plastic wherever possible and put all rubbish in the bin so it doesn't end up in the ocean.

Source: Farm4Static via Flickr

Want to know more?

- Read **the *Pacific Sea Turtle Education kit*** by SPREP
- Visit: www.iucnredlist.org

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