



2006

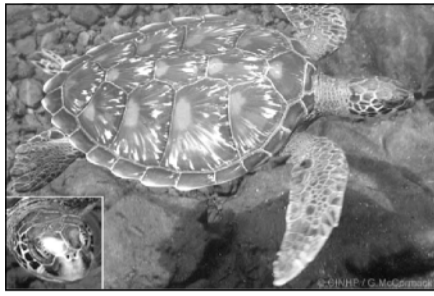
Pacific Year of the Sea Turtle



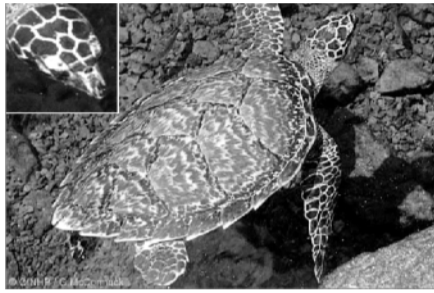
Ministry of Marine Resources



Cook Islands Turtles



The Green Turtle - rare in the Southern Group except for Palmerston. Found in the north. CINHP



The Hawksbill Turtle - rare throughout the Cook Islands. CINHP



The Loggerhead Turtle - very rare in the Cook Islands. Easily confused with the Green Turtle. NOAA

For more about CI turtles check out <http://cookislands.bishopmuseum.org/>

Sea Turtles and the Cooks

Contribution by Marine Resources

Sea turtles are a sign of significance and power. Our connection is our belonging to the same sea and land. Just as they should be enabled to continue to return to our shores, we should continue to go back and learn from our heritage. And so goes the theme for 2006 Year of the Turtle, "Protect Them, Protect Our Heritage."

Sea turtles have lived in the oceans for over 100 million years, but in the last 50-100 years turtle numbers have been declining. Excessive human use and degradation of habitat have sent sea turtles to the endangered species list. Humans are killing turtles for their meat, eggs, oil and shells at a faster rate than they can reproduce.

Turtles are slow to mature, not laying eggs until they are 20-50 years old. Therefore our efforts to protect them must be long term if our children are to witness these wondrous creatures.

The Cook Islands is signed on with the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) agreeing to ban all trade of sea turtle species, products and derivatives. Initiatives such as 'Headstarting' conservation efforts have taken place on some outer islands.

Headstarting is the process of raising hatchling sea turtles until they are a larger size, which may increase the survival rate, allowing more sea turtles to make it to breeding age.

However, this is a trial experiment with indeterminate success and recently only injured or apprehended turtles are kept. Turtles are not pets but wild animals and should not be kept at home; they belong in their natural environment.

If you sight a turtle it is beneficial to contact the Ministry of Marine Resources or Environmental Services to help with research efforts. The Ministry of Marine Resources has been involved in educating better releasing methods to the fishing industry. Cook Islands fishing regulations have conditions to avoid turtle by-catch.

Turtles migrate thousands of kilometers between their birth sites and feeding grounds, making them a shared resource among all Pacific Islands. A regional conservation approach is needed, but local efforts are very important.

A turtle's success is dependant on being undisturbed so it can return to its birth island to lay eggs. Protecting the nesting grounds

is the best way to help the turtles survive. This includes keeping sites protected from predators (such as dogs), and human disturbances (such as lights, since hatchlings follow the light of the horizon to find the sea). Loud noises and man made structures on the beach also scare the females ready to nest. Keeping beaches free of litter and helping against erosion will provide enough space for turtle nests.

The increased development of Rarotonga shores has contributed to the reluctance of turtles to using our shores as nesting grounds. Turtles can also be used as ecological indicators helping scientists to determine lagoon health, and looking at the overall health of the lagoon is priority not only for the turtle's sake but ours! It is essential to preserve the beaches left on the outer, less developed, islands to ensure that the turtle populations that visit Cook Islands' shores will continue to do so for the generations to come.

A ceremony to declare the Year of the Turtle will be held this Wednesday, March 1st at Avatea School around 9:00am. All are welcome to attend and also take part in the awareness events throughout the year.

Pacific Year of the Sea Turtle Campaign

GOAL: To recover turtle stocks and conserve them and their cultural and nutritional values for the coastal people of the countries and territories served by SPREP.

This year has been declared the "Year of the Sea Turtle"(YOST). The SPREP Regional Marine Species Programme Framework 2003 - 2007 highlights turtle conservation as one of the priority areas.

The first Year of the Sea Turtle campaign in the Pacific was undertaken by SPREP in 1995. It was highly successful in that in the last 10 years concern for the turtle conservation and wise use has grown in the region.

Turtles play an integral ecological role in the functioning of coastal marine habitats throughout the Pacific region.

They are very much a part of the traditions of many Pacific island people featuring in legends and traditional uses.

Due to factors such as excessive hunting, harvesting of turtle eggs, habitat degradation, pollution and so on turtle populations have declined so drastically that they are now considered endangered throughout their range.

Given their highly migratory nature and natural pattern of life (feeding grounds different from nesting areas), their migratory paths, feeding grounds and nesting areas involve several different jurisdictions. Turtles thus face varying threats on their migratory movements.

The Turtle campaign will be conducted throughout the whole year.

Article adapted from SPREP Circular



Marine Turtle Facts

- Marine turtles grow slowly & take between 30 & 50 years to reach sexual maturity.
- After reaching sexual maturity, marine turtles breed for about 30 years
- Young marine turtles drift & feed in the open ocean for about 5 years.
- The upper shell of the turtle is called the carapace.
- The lower shell is called the plastron.
- A flat plastron indicates a female turtle, while a concave plastron indicates a male turtle.
- Turtles have no teeth.
- The turtle is a reptile.
- Warm, dark sand produces mostly females, while cool white sand mostly produces males.
- The "tears" of the turtle is actually concentrated salt solution that removes salt ingested by the turtle from drinking seawater. Also washes the eyes free of sand.
- Female turtles lay their eggs just above the mean high water mark.
- The Cook Islands has two marine turtles. The Hawksbill Turtle (Onu Tara) and the Green Turtle (Onu Kai)
- Hawksbill Turtle feeds & breeds within the Cook Islands
- The Green Turtle spends most of its life feeding around Fiji and Vanuatu, and visits the Cook Islands once every 3 years to breed.
- During each laying, a single clutch contains about 100 white, spherical, "ping-pong" ball sized eggs.
- Female eggs hatch in 7 to 8 weeks. Male eggs takes longer to hatch.
- Most hatchlings reach the sea, however most of these young turtles face heavy predation by sharks and other fishes and sea birds.
- The largest Marine turtle is the Leatherback turtle, which can grow up to 2.4m and weigh just over 500kg.
- There are about 250 species of turtles.
- Turtles are over 200 million years old, this means that turtles were around when dinosaurs were.

Turtles: Protect them, Protect our Heritage

The launch date for the Pacific Year of the Sea Turtle campaign is
Wednesday 1 March at Avatea School.

STUDENTS!



Read the Marine Turtle Facts on this page and be ready to take part in the

RADIO QUIZ
on Wednesday morning
Get the answers correct and you're in with a chance to
WIN PRIZES!



To find out more about the Year of the Turtle check out the website <http://www.ioseaturtles.org/yot2006/>

IOSEA is the Indian Ocean and South East Asia marine turtle organisation. The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) will launch its own Year of the Sea Turtle initiative on 1 March, coinciding with launch of the IOSEA campaign.