

Guidelines for watching turtles

At night on the beach please follow the following code of conduct to reduce the level of disturbance to these ancient mariners:

- ← Always use minimal torch light, turtle watching is best on a full moon.
- ← Walk the beach looking for turtle tracks, these will be about 1 metre wide. Follow the tracks carefully and quietly to locate the turtle.
- ← Avoid approaching turtles until they are well under way with their nest excavation, the earlier in the nesting process, the easier the turtle is disturbed. When the turtle is laying (sitting still after a long period of throwing sand) you can approach her quietly and use minimal torchlight to see both her and her eggs.
- ← Avoid excess noise or sudden movements.
- ← It is best never to touch a turtle and certainly no-one should ever ride on a turtle's back.
- ← Only use flash photography when a turtle is laying her eggs and take pictures from her rear or side to avoid blinding and disorientating her, especially as she is returning to the sea.



- ← Bright lights will attract hatchlings away from the sea and increase mortality. If you are on the beach at night please avoid using bright lights.
- ← Do not have bonfires or barbecues on the beach during the nesting or hatching season (December-July)

Watching turtles laying or hatching at night is a remarkable experience, please respect them.

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For more information on the green turtles in Ascension:

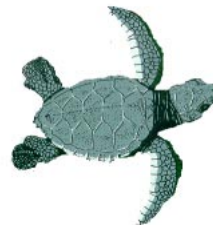
Huxley, R.C. (1997) Ascension Island and Turtles: A Monograph. Available from the Ascension Island Heritage Society, 30pages.

Visit the web site of the Darwin Initiative Turtle Project:

<http://www.swansea.AC.UK/biosci/turtl/index.htm>

The Islander newspaper can be accessed on-line at:

<http://www.the-islander.org.ac>



SEA TURTLES



OF ASCENSION ISLAND



A Brief Background

Every year between December and June, male and female green (*Chelonia mydas*) sea turtles migrate from Brazil to the tiny south atlantic island of Ascension, some 2000 km away. Here they mate and the females crawl ashore to lay their eggs in the sand. How they navigate and find Ascension is not fully understood but it is possible that it is through a combination of smell and magnetic orientation. It is estimated that between 3-5000 female green turtles nest on Ascension Island each year, making it one of the largest rookeries in the Atlantic Ocean.

The hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) is also found in Ascension Island waters although is not known to nest here. Most individuals regularly seen appear to be small and medium sized juveniles.



If it was not for the presence of the green turtle, Ascension Island may not be the place it is today. In previous years, these herbivorous sea turtles were an important source of fresh meat for passing ships. When turtles came ashore to lay their eggs they were easily captured and stored in the Turtle Ponds (which can still be seen in Georgetown) until needed. The turtles were then kept alive on board the vessels until required. Nowadays no turtles are taken for meat in Ascension and green turtles are classified as endangered and protected under local and international law.

Biology of the green turtle

Green turtles are found nesting on many tropical and sub-tropical beaches around the globe, however the green turtles that nest on Ascension are the largest of their species in the world (1.5m-1.75m in length and up to 250kg in weight). This is likely to enable them to cope with their arduous migration and the huge waves that crash onto the Island's shores. In addition, as they are herbivorous and feed on seaweed and grasses, of which there are very little in Ascension, it is thought that neither the males nor females feed during their migration or nesting season, a period of 3-6 months!

Green turtles are thought to be between 20 and 40 years old when they reach maturity and make the journey to their nesting grounds for the first time. Most females will make the journey every 3 or 4 years. Whilst it is not known exactly how old they live until it is estimated to be in the region of 60-100 years.

Shortly after arrival mating occurs and then females undertake the nesting process as many as ten times at intervals of 10-17 days.

Once the turtle has dug a large pit with all of her flippers she digs a chamber with her hind flippers into which she lays approximately 120 ping-pong sized eggs. When she reaches this stage she sits virtually motionless. This is the only time when turtles should be closely observed.

After 50-60 days incubating in the sand the eggs hatch and the hatchlings climb up through the sand



to make their way down to the sea. They have to escape predation by birds, crabs, feral cats and fish. Predation is considerable and it is estimated that less than one hatchling in a thousand will survive until adulthood to return and complete the breeding cycle.

Where to watch sea turtles on Ascension

From December until early March the best place to see mating green turtles is off Long Beach, Georgetown. Mating pairs can be seen close to the shore and jousting males can often be seen fighting over a female. In December nesting numbers are low but as the season escalates in March there can be as many as 100 females coming ashore to lay per night. The nesting continues until June. The best time to see nesting females is between 10pm and 2am, although for the early riser there are often a few females still on the beach at dawn. This is an excellent opportunity to see them close up without disturbing them by using torches. All of the sandy beaches of Ascension have turtles nesting on them, although Long Beach, PanAm Beach, Hannay (Blowhole) Beach, North East Bay and English Bay have the densest nesting.

The hatching season peaks from March-May. Hatchlings usually emerge at night and this can make it hard to see them. However on a moonlit night or early morning you can often see them rushing to the sea trying to escape the predators awaiting them.