

# HAWAII'S SEA TURTLES

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(Green sea  
turtle)

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(Hawksbill  
sea turtle)

*Did you  
know...*

*... sea turtles  
cannot  
retract their  
heads nor  
flippers into  
their shells.*



Photo courtesy Leni Mazzuca ©1997

## Hawaii's Sea Turtles

Three species of sea turtles are considered native to Hawaii: green, hawksbill, and leatherback. Two other species, the loggerhead and olive ridley, are sometimes observed in Hawaiian waters. The life span of sea turtles is unknown. They grow very slowly in the wild and take an average of 25 years to reach sexual maturity. Sea turtles are important to the culture and environment of Hawaii. They are featured in Hawaiian mythology and petroglyphs, and as *aumakua* (personal family gods and guardians).

## Green Sea Turtle

The green sea turtle is the most common sea turtle in Hawaiian waters. It feeds on marine plants in shallow coastal waters throughout the islands. Green sea turtles are primarily vegetarian and eat algae ("limu") growing underwater on coral reefs and rocks in shallow coastal waters. These turtles grow to an adult breeding size of 200 pounds or more. Hawaii's green sea turtles migrate once every 2-5 years across hundreds of miles of open ocean to mate and nest in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands at isolated French Frigate Shoals. Although Hawaii's green turtle population has increased in recent years, green sea turtles living in certain areas are currently suffering from *fibropapilloma*, a disease that causes fibrous growths on the eyes, neck, flippers, and in the mouth. It is believed to be caused by a virus, and can be fatal to turtles.

*ALL sea turtles, alive and dead, are protected by the Endangered Species Act.*

*This law makes it illegal to harass, disturb, harm, kill, or keep sea turtles in captivity without a permit, or sell any sea turtle parts or products.*

*Report any suspected violations to the NOAA Fisheries Enforcement at (800) 853-1964.*

*Report nesting or basking activities, and dead, sick, injured, or stranded turtles to the NOAA Fisheries Honolulu Lab at (808) 943-1276.*

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## Hawksbill

The hawksbill is also native to Hawaii. This species is critically endangered and it is believed that very few of these turtles remain in our island waters. Hawksbills nest on a few small sand beaches on the Big Island, Maui, Molokai, and Oahu. These areas are extremely important habitat for hawksbill turtles. Mature hawksbills measure about three feet long and weigh up to 200 pounds. Hawksbills use their long, narrow beaks to probe for food. Hawksbills feed on invertebrates, including some sponges that are toxic to most other animals. The meat of some hawksbills is poisonous to humans.

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## Leatherback

The leatherback is the world's largest turtle and can grow up to eight feet long and weigh up to 2,000 pounds. Leatherback turtles are seen regularly in Hawaii's deep offshore waters, where they feed on jellyfish and other invertebrates. Leatherbacks do not normally nest on Hawaii's beaches, although a rare nesting of a leatherback was documented on Lanai in 1997. (Unfortunately, the eggs were infertile.) The leatherback is the only sea turtle species that lacks a hard shell.

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## Threats

- Accidental capture, especially in gillnets
- Collision with boats
- Fibropapilloma virus in green sea turtles
- Habitat degradation
- Human disturbance of nesting areas
- Illegal capture and killing
- Marine debris

*Sponsored by the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary and the NOAA Fisheries Office of Enforcement*



**HAWAIIAN ISLANDS HUMPBACK WHALE**  
NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

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