

## **Turtles of Ascension**

Every year, male and female green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) migrate to the tiny South Atlantic island of Ascension, a distance of over 2000km. 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 3000-5000 female green turtles nest on Ascension Island each year, making it one of the largest rookeries in the Atlantic Ocean.

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

If it was not for the presence of the green turtles, Ascension Island may not be the place it is today. Historically, 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 Turtles (which can still be seen in Georgetown). The turtles were kept alive onboard the vessels until required. Nowadays, no turtles are taken for meat in Ascension and green turtles are classified as endangered and protected under the local and international law.

### **Biology of the Green Turtle**

Green Turtles are found nesting on many tropical and sub-tropical beaches around the world; however, the green turtles that nest on Ascension are the largest of their species (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 into the Island's shores. In addition, as they are herbivorous and feed on seaweed and grasses, of which there are very little around Ascension, it is thought that neither the males nor females feed during the migration or nesting season, a period of 3-6 months!

Green Turtles are thought to be between 20-40 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 known exactly how long they live, it is estimated to be in the region of 60-100 years. Shortly after arrival, mating occurs and then the females undertake the nesting progress 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 of incubating in the sand, the clutch hatches 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, especially at sea, is considerable and it is estimated that less than one hatchling in a thousand will survive until adulthood, when it will be return and complete the breeding cycle.

#### Where to watch the seas turtles on Ascension

From November until early May 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 females. Although nesting starts in November, numbers are low until late December, escalating to a peak in March when there can be as many as 100 females per night coming ashore to lay on Long Beach. High levels of nesting continue until May, with occasional nesting through June, July and August. 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 on Ascension have turtles nesting on them, although Long Beach, PanAm Beach, Hannay (Blowhole) Beach, North East Bay and English Bay have the densest nesting.

Hatching peaks March-June. Hatchlings usually emerge at night and this can make it hard to see them. On a moonlight night, however, or early morning, you can often see them rushing to the sea trying to escape the predators awaiting them.

#### Guidelines for watching Turtles

At night on the beach please adhere to the following code of conduct to reduce the level of disturbance:

- Always use minimal torch light, turtle watching is best on a moonlight night.
- 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 observe both her and her eggs.

- Avoid excess noise or sudden movements.
- It is best never to touch and certainly no-one should 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 when she is returning to the sea.
- Bright lights will attract hatchlings away from the sea and increase mortality. If you are on the beach or using the beach hut at night, please avoid using bright lights.
- Do not have bonfires or barbecues on the beach during the main nesting or hatching season. (December-July).
- Remember to take your litter home with you.

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