



Department of Planning and Natural Resources
Division of Fish and Wildlife



U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #24
Introduced Species and Sea Turtles



Photographs of a green turtle whose eyes were chewed out by dogs, while attempting to nest.

Exotic species are plants or animals that are introduced into any area to which they are not native. An exotic species becomes invasive once it begins to reproduce and is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm human health. Invasive species can be plants, insects, animals, or diseases.

Invasive species often reshape the environment in which they have been introduced. They may even make the local habitat uninhabitable by any other organism but the specific invasive species. One of the main reasons an introduced species becomes invasive is the lack of natural predators in their new environment.

The lack of natural predators may allow the introduced organism to go through a population explosion. A population explosion occurs when a species multiplies at an uncontrolled rate because the rate of mortality has decreased (there is no predation).

Many invasive species are accidentally introduced. Rats, fire ants, tan-tan, Cuban tree frogs and acacia are some local examples of accidental introductions. Some introduced species came to the islands as pets (dogs, cats, pythons, red eared sliders) livestock (goats, pigs, cows), ornamental plants (blood grass, water lettuce, coral vine) and subsequently were

abandoned, escaped or were unintentionally released due to hurricanes, fires or deaths of the owners.

Other introductions have been intentional. Locally our major intentionally introduced species are the mongoose, cane toad, and white tailed deer. Of these the mongoose has created the biggest environmental disturbance. Their impact has been felt by all ground dwelling animals in the territory. Mongoose are generally diurnal animals (active during the day). However, those who live along the beaches have become nocturnal, at least during the turtle nesting season. Mongoose have become a major predator of sea turtle hatchlings and eggs.

Perhaps the greatest sea turtle predators are the feral dogs and cats on the islands. They will eat the eggs and hatchlings but will also attack the adults. In the last three years we have been receiving increasing numbers of calls from people about dogs attacking turtles nesting on the beach. Sea turtles spend almost their entire lives swimming in the ocean, and have developed special adaptations to allow them to remain at sea. These adaptations make sea turtles extremely graceful and agile while in the water but ungainly on land. While nesting, they are not agile or fast enough to avoid these introduced predators. They are unable

to pull their heads and flippers into their shell like tortoises, which makes them very vulnerable to attack by terrestrial predators.

Virtually all the documented damage to nesting turtles has been to the head and neck region of the turtle, as you can see in the pictures. Rarely has any damage been documented to the flippers or carapace of the turtle. It is important to realize that the dogs may attack not only turtles but possibly small children playing on the beach as well.



This hawksbill was also attacked by dogs. It had hunched its head down and had the back of its neck torn out.

These animals have enough trouble with natural threats. On land nests wash away during incubation, ants and crabs invade nests, and birds eat hatchlings as they emerge from nests. In the water fish eat hatchlings and juveniles, while sharks and killer whales prey on adults (we estimate that for every 1000 eggs laid one turtle may survive to adulthood and reproduce). To add human stressors to the equation is too great a burden for the species. We need to take extra effort to keep our domestic animals from attacking our turtles.

All sea turtles are protected by Territorial, Federal and International laws and treaties, which have been instituted to attempt to protect threatened and

endangered species so that their populations can increase to a point where they no longer need protection to sustain their natural population levels.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Sea turtles do not have an effective way to avoid predation on land. They can't pull their heads and flippers into their shell. This makes them easy prey for introduced predators.
- Any dog found running at night may be seized, impounded and disposed of (VIC: Title 19, Chap. 66, § 2615). You can and will be held liable for the death of any endangered species caused by your pet.
- Do not discard unwanted pets. Take them to the Humane Society. They can cause extensive damage to our already fragile island ecosystem.
- You may not harass or kill sea turtles under ANY circumstances.
- Turtles are easily disoriented by lights. When they are on the beach do not take flash pictures or shine lights directly toward the sea turtles.

What you can do to help

1. If you see any turtle nesting or hatching events, please write down the date, time and location you saw the turtles, then call the Sea Turtle Assistance and Rescue (STAR) network 1-878-1TURTLE.
2. Contact STAR or 911 if you find a turtle being attacked by animals.
3. Neuter or spay your dogs and cats and keep them under your control at all times.
4. If you see someone harassing a sea turtle or poaching a nest, call the local police (911) or the local Division of Environmental Enforcement STT 340-774-3320, STX 340-773-5774.
5. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our web site at:

www.vifishandwildlife.com

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