



Department of Planning and Natural Resources  
Division of Fish and Wildlife  
U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #26



## Background & Regulations

Sea turtles spend almost their entire lives swimming in the ocean and have developed 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. The only time they are not in the ocean is when females return to shore to lay eggs and when, as embryos, they are developing inside the egg in the sand on the beach (they leave land after hatching).

Sea turtles are very susceptible to harassment and predation on land. While nesting, they are not agile enough to avoid predators and are unable to pull their heads and flippers into their shell like tortoises.

Major threats to sea turtles include, but are not limited to: destruction and alteration of nesting and foraging habitats, incidental capture in commercial and recreational fisheries, entanglement in marine debris, vessel strikes, poaching, and predation.

Four of the seven global species of sea turtles live in the U.S.V.I. They are the hawksbill, green, loggerhead and leatherback. Information can be found in Division of Fish and Wildlife factsheets or on our web site [www.vifishandwildlife.com](http://www.vifishandwildlife.com).

The quickest way to tell if a turtle is a sea turtle is to look at its legs. All sea turtles have flippers instead of feet. If a turtle has feet with claws or nails then it is not a sea turtle.

Sea turtles are a very important part of our local marine ecosystem. While it may seem that there are a lot of turtles in our local waters, the numbers in no way compare to the original numbers of turtles in the territory, which may have been 100 to 1,000 times higher. Locally turtles play a keystone role in the environment. Key stone species are those that significantly impact the ecosystem in a way that is disproportionate to their abundance. The removal of keystone species initiates changes in the ecosystem

structure, generally with a significant loss of diversity. To put it another way, a keystone species is one whose impacts on the ecosystem are large and greater than would be expected from its relative abundance.

Hawksbills are highly selective feeders and feed on specific and common types of sponges therefore helping rarer species become established and compete successfully for space and nutrients on the reef.



**Sea turtle DO NOT make good pets!**

Green turtles graze on seagrass. Similar to the grazing by cows on grass, the grazing (removal of the tips of the grass) may help seagrass meadows recycle nutrients. Ungrazed areas tend to have grass blades that are longer, wider, less dense and less productive. To maintain the health of the sea grass meadows the grasses need to be grazed.

Leatherbacks feed exclusively on pelagic jellyfish, which in turn feed on fish larvae

and other plankton. As the numbers of leatherbacks decline, the numbers of jellyfish appear to have increased. So the decline in leatherbacks may have significant effects on the numbers of commercially and recreationally important fish, because the larvae are eaten by jellyfish, as well as our own well being while swimming in the ocean.

### Regulations

All species of sea turtles are protected under Territorial, Federal and International laws and treaties. The USVI passed the USVI Indigenous and Endangered Species Act in 1990 (Title 12, Chapter 2). The Act states:

- No person may take, catch, or possess, or attempt to take, catch or possess, any specimen of an endangered or threatened species unless such person holds a valid collecting permit from the Federal Government in the case of Federally listed species or a Territorial permit in the case of an exclusively territorially listed species.

- No person may ship, transport, or export any specimen of an endangered or threatened species or parts or products thereof, whether for sale or not, unless such person holds a valid Federal permit in the case of a Federally listed species or a valid Territorial permit in the case of an exclusively territorially listed species.
- No person may harass, injure or kill, or attempt to do the same, or sell or offer for sale any specimen, or parts or products of such specimen, of an endangered or threatened species.
- No person may disturb, damage or remove the nest, or contents of any nest of any indigenous, or endangered species.

The Federal Endangered Species Act of 1973 (Title 16 Chapter 35) specifically states that, it is unlawful for any person subject to the jurisdiction of the United States to:

- (A) import or export any endangered or threatened species into or from the United States;
  - (B) take any endangered or threatened species within the United States or the territorial sea of the United States;
  - (C) take any endangered or threatened species upon the high seas;
  - (D) possess, sell, deliver, carry, transport, or ship, by any means whatsoever, any endangered or threatened species taken in violation of subparagraphs (B) and (C);
  - (E) deliver, receive, carry, transport, or ship in interstate or foreign commerce, by any means whatsoever and in the course of a commercial activity, any such (endangered or threatened) species;
  - (F) sell or offer for sale in interstate or foreign commerce any endangered or threatened species
- (Note: The term "take" means to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct.)

In 1973 the US signed onto CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), which is an international agreement between Governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. All marine turtles are listed under Appendix I of CITES.

Appendix I lists species that are the most endangered among CITES-listed animals and plants. These are threatened with extinction and CITES prohibits international trade in specimens of these species. However, under exceptional circumstances trade may be allowed (for example; scientific research or breeding).

## **WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

- You may not keep sea turtles as pets under ANY circumstances.
- Releasing any wildlife, held in captivity, may risk the health of wild animals. Diseases picked up in captivity may be introduced into the local populations. These exotic diseases can have serious effects on the local populations. Each turtle released by the Division of Fish and Wildlife undergoes an extensive physical examination and series of tests before it can be released. Contact the Division of Fish and Wildlife for more information.
- Turtles are easily disoriented by lights. Do not take flash pictures or shine lights directly toward sea turtles, especially at night. Contact Fish and Wildlife for more information.
- If you live on, or near the beach do not allow your pet dogs or cats outside at night. Dogs and cats will attack and kill nesting turtles and hatchlings.

## **What you can do to help**

1. If you see a nesting turtle, Do not crowd around the turtle and do not harass it. Do not touch or shine lights on the turtle. Do not use flash photography lights can disorient the turtle and make it difficult to find the water. You may observe the nesting from a distance. If you observe a nesting stay behind the front flippers of the turtle so you don't disturb the turtle.
2. There are specially trained and permitted people who may handle sea turtles for the purposes of research, conservation and education. Training is offered to interested individuals. Contact the Sea Turtle Assistance and Rescue hotline (1-888-1turtle) for more information.
3. 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.
4. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our web site at:

**[www.vifishandwildlife.com](http://www.vifishandwildlife.com)**

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