



A hawksbill turtle nesting at Eagle Island

Sea turtles and their protection in the Chagos islands

Two species of sea turtles, the hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), can be found nesting on the beaches of the Chagos Islands and feeding in their near shore waters. During most of the period that people inhabited these islands, since the 1760s, human impact on turtle populations was undoubtedly intense due to consumption of meat, export of tortoiseshell¹ and the impact of feral animals such as dogs, cats, pigs and rats on the turtle rookeries⁴. Chagos was recognised as a "significant producer" of hawksbill shell throughout much of that period, and data from ships logs in the early 1800s indicate that green turtle nesting may have been orders of magnitude greater than it is today^{1,2}.

Currently, some 300–700 hawksbills and 400–800 green turtles are estimated to nest annually, distributed amongst the 67 islands and islets of the Chagos group⁴. The relative proportion and numbers of each species varies from atoll to atoll. Hawksbills are relatively more abundant at Peros Banhos and Diego Garcia, and green turtles nest in greatest numbers at Egmont Islands, Chagos Bank and Diego Garcia^{3,4}. Diego Garcia, which accounts for 57% of the land area of Chagos and 63% of the total coastline, not surprisingly hosts the greatest amount of turtle nesting in the archipelago. Nowadays turtles are legally protected throughout Chagos, but the most effective active protection occurs at Diego Garcia. Approximately 50% of the land is managed as a strict nature reserve where adult female turtles can lay their eggs and immature turtles can forage unmolested by people. A unique feeding site for sea turtles is Turtle Cove, located at the south end of Diego Garcia. (For more information about Turtle Cove, see *Factsheet 069*).

¹ Frazier, J. 1977. Marine turtles in the western Indian Ocean: British Indian Ocean Territory, Comores. Typescript. ii + 33, vi + 144 pp.

² Horsburgh, J. 1809. Directions for sailing to and from the East Indies, China, New Holland, Cape of Good Hope, and the interjacent ports; compiled chiefly from original journals at the East India House, and from journals and observations made during twenty-one years experience navigating in those seas. Part First. Black, Parry and Kingsbury, London. 397 pp.

³ Mortimer, J.A. 2000. Diego Garcia Marine Turtle Conservation Assessment (British Indian Ocean Territory). Final Report: on the Fieldwork to the British Indian Ocean Territory Department, Environment Science & Energy Department, and Foreign & Commonwealth Office. 69 pages.

⁴ Mortimer, J.A. & Day, M. 1999. Sea turtle populations and habitats in the Chagos Archipelago. Pp. 159-172, in Sheppard, C.R.C. and Seaward, M.R.D. (eds). Ecology of the Chagos Archipelago. Linnean Society Occasional Publications 2.

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