



COMMONWEALTH of the
NORTHERN MARIANAS ISLANDS



PHOTOS BY CERIS BANGS



T H R E A T E N E D
GREEN SEA TURTLE

Haggan *Chamorro* **Wong Mool** *Carolinian*

Chelonia mydas

IDENTIFICATION

Green sea turtles have brownish/olive shells (carapaces) and small heads. The largest of all sea turtles, adults can have a shell length of four feet (1.2m) and can weigh over three hundred pounds (136kg). Their heads have two plates between the eyes and each of their flippers has only one claw.

HABITAT and FEEDING

The Green sea turtle is the most commonly sighted turtle in CNMI waters. Adult Green sea turtles are herbivores, feeding on sea grasses and algae. They frequent the shallow reef areas and sea grass beds in search of food. Juvenile Green sea turtles are carnivores and live in pelagic (open ocean) habitats, feeding on invertebrates and fish eggs.

REPRODUCTION

It takes twenty-three to thirty years before females are sexually mature and return to their natal beach to nest. Females mate with males in shallow waters near nesting areas. Twenty-five to thirty days later, females lay eggs on the beaches where they were born. Mating continues throughout the spring months, with females mating with more than one male.

Once the eggs are fertilized, the female crawls onto a beach and up to the vegetated area above the high tide line. She uses her back flippers to dig a large pit for her eggs. She then

deposits forty to one hundred and forty eggs into the pit and covers them with sand. A female can lay up to six clutches of eggs in one nesting season. The eggs take fifty to ninety days to hatch. Two-inch (5cm) long hatchlings emerge near sunrise and head out to the sea.

THREATS and CONSERVATION

Primary threats to sea turtles in the CNMI are direct capture of nesting females, theft of entire clutches of eggs by poachers, coastal construction, lights on beaches (from hotels) and driving on beaches. Sea turtles are also threatened by loss of habitats such as sea grass/algae beds and coral reefs.

Turtle meat, eggs and shells are prized by different cultures living in the CNMI. Although turtle hunting is banned, poaching still exists. Habitat loss due to human population expansion and tourism are threats to sea turtles because there are very few nesting areas for Green sea turtles on the urbanized islands of the CNMI. Only one in three hundred survive to sexual maturity.

Worldwide concern about over-harvesting resulted in the Green sea turtle being listed as a federally threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Locally, it is listed as an endangered species and is protected under CNMI law. It is illegal to capture, harass, possess, buy, sell, or transport the Green sea turtle or any part thereof including but not limited to eggs, shells, shell jewelry and meat.

- Farallon de Pajaros (Uracas)
- Maug
- Asuncion
- Agrihan
- Pagan
- Alamagan
- Guguan
- Sarigan
- Anatahan
- Farallon de Medinilla
- Saipan
- Tinian
- Aguiguan
- Rota

Distribution in the CNMI
* Feeding grounds
* Feeding and nesting grounds

SEX CHANGE

The temperature of a nest determines the sex of the clutch (baby turtles). Male clutches develop at lower temperatures than female clutches.

FACTOID!



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