



Dude, They're Back: the Hawksbill Turtles of Cozumel

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You can't pick up a diving or nature magazine these days without some writer trying to convince you that, thanks to us *humans*, marine life is doomed. Even as these harbingers of ecological crises are busy heralding the death of the oceans, there are instances where just the opposite is being observed. One of the areas where I've noticed not only an absence of decline, but apparent growth, is in the abundance of Hawksbill turtles around Cozumel, Mexico.

When I started traveling to Cozumel back in the seventies, and for many years thereafter, seeing turtles during our dives was a rare treat. There used to

be a popular restaurant on the island, Las Tortugas, whose house specialties included turtle soup and turtle steaks, and where we could see the many

large turtle shells that decorated the walls, but seeing them in the water wasn't a daily occurrence. Occasionally, our divemaster Charro would find one of the



hard shelled critters noshing on a sponge on Palancar Reef and would show it to the group, but seeing a turtle wasn't something you could count on every trip, let alone on every dive. Lately, though, it hasn't been a matter of "will we see a turtle," but rather "how many turtles will we see?" The turtles most commonly encountered around Cozumel are the Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and the Hawksbill Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*).

The Hawksbill turtle gets its name from the beak-like shape of its mouth. This shape apparently allows them to more efficiently eat their favorite food, sponges, and to pick other tasty invertebrates like anemones from crevices in the reef. A fully grown Hawksbill can eat about 1200 pounds (550 kg) of sponges every year.

Hawksbills are medium size marine turtles, a lot smaller than Greens or Loggerheads. On average, adult Hawksbills run in the 100 to 150 pound (45-75 kg) range, but may grow as large as 200 pounds (90 kg), and may be

up to 35 inches (90 cm) long. Female Hawksbill turtles lay their eggs every two or three years on the same beach where they themselves were hatched. (Hawksbills nest elsewhere in the Yucatan, rather than Cozumel.) Unlike those of Green turtles and Loggerheads, Hawksbill nests are not buried in the sand, but are laid in or under vegetation higher up on the beach. A Hawksbill nest may contain a clutch of up to 140 eggs, and each female Hawksbill may lay 4 to 5 clutches each nesting season. Upon hatching the young Hawksbills begin their life as two-inch-long (5cm) hatchlings weighing less than an ounce (30 g). They scurry across the beach and head for the open ocean where they spend a few years swimming in the pelagic environment eating jellyfish before returning to the coastal reef areas.

Hawksbill turtles have a number of natural predators, including sharks, groupers, and octopus. Hawksbill eggs are frequently consumed by dogs, rats, and other creatures. Humans, of course, also still eat turtle meat

and eggs, and over the centuries have used turtle shell for a variety of applications, though marine turtles are widely protected these days. Being able to approach large critters underwater is always pretty exciting. And the fact that Hawksbill turtles tend to just sit there and chew makes them outstanding photo subjects, which I'm all in favor of. Big, colorful, slow moving creatures are way more photogenic (and easier to shoot) than tiny, fast moving ones.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) continues to list the Hawksbill turtle as Critically Endangered. While the environmental lobby continues to blame human activity on the decline of marine populations, it's pretty clear that some human activity, like the many private and public turtle salvation programs, are helping to foster the regrowth of some species, like these turtles. Whatever the reason, it's good to see more and more turtles when diving in Cozumel.