

Traditional Sensibility in the Andamans

During a visit to India's Little Andaman Island in January 2006, members of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Environmental Team met a man named Tai, an elder of the Onge community who lives within a tribal reserve along the island's west coast. Team members explained their intent to study the impact of the recent tsunami on sea turtles and asked Tai if he had any information on how the turtles had been affected. After recounting how he and others had escaped the tsunami, Tai told a story that highlights the important human relationship with nature that often exists within traditional communities.

Following the tsunami, the Onge women craved sea turtle meat and asked the men to go hunting. They did, and returned with a few green turtles, which feed in nearby seagrass beds.

The turtles, however, were very lean and lacked the fat and thick flesh that the Onge women desired. The women were disappointed. The community concluded that because the nearby seagrass beds had been damaged by the tsunami, the turtles were not finding enough food to stay healthy and fat. As a result, the women decided that despite their hunger for sea turtle meat, the men should not hunt again until the seagrass beds had recovered and the turtles had returned to feed and regain their health. Since then, Tai said, the men had stopped hunting not only turtles, but dugongs, which also feed on the grasses.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are home to many indigenous communities who live traditional lifestyles of hunting, gathering, and small-scale cultivation. These islanders are exempt from the Indian Wildlife Protection Act and are allowed to use wildlife for sustenance, but not for sale. Their traditional lifestyles and direct relationships with nature provide an enlightening contrast to more recently settled communities in this same island group.

There are many other threats to sea turtles in the area, such as ghost fishing nets, poaching, and beach loss attributable to sand mining—most of these brought on by recent settlers or by changes in traditional



Consumption of sea turtles is not uncommon among peoples of the Andaman Sea. Here, Nicobari villagers from Chingen on Great Nicobar Island prepare a green turtle for eating. © KARTIK SHANKER

lifestyles. The Onges' story highlights the simple wisdom of this community in managing resources effectively. It reminds us that conservation is not only about looking forward to new management systems, but also about looking back to traditional ideas and practices.

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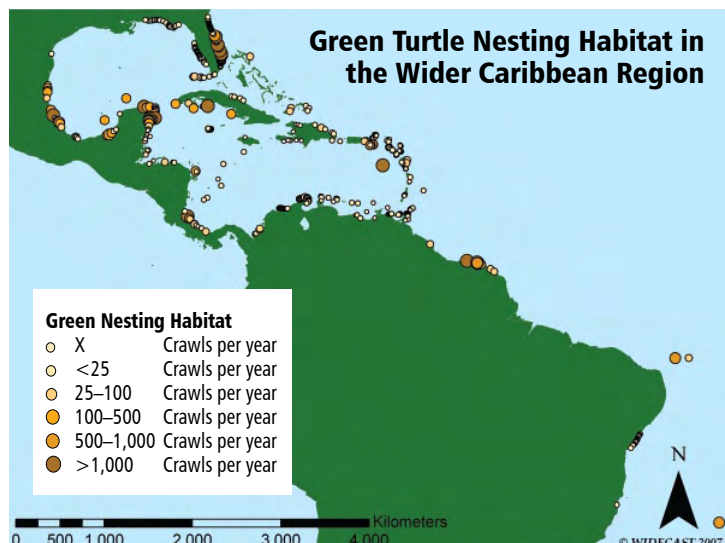
Where Do Sea Turtles Nest in the Caribbean Sea?

In a recent assessment, the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) answered the question definitively. Current nesting grounds for six sea turtle species, including 592 sites for the green turtle (shown in the map at left), were georeferenced and mapped in collaboration with The Nature Conservancy, the United Nations Environment Programme–Caribbean Environment Programme, the Pegasus Foundation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and more than 100 data contributors in the Caribbean region.

The study concludes that Caribbean green turtles typically nest in small colonies. More than half of all known nesting beaches receive fewer than 25 crawls (including successful and unsuccessful nesting attempts) each year. At 141 sites (23.8 percent of the total sites), current data are insufficient to estimate annual crawl abundance, although these colonies are also likely to be very small.

The 32 beaches (5.4 percent of total beaches) reporting more than 500 crawls per year are mostly distributed along the continental margins of the wider Caribbean region. Tortuguero, Costa Rica, recorded more than 50,000 crawls in the 2005 nesting season—by far the region's largest green turtle nesting colony.

The database—which will soon be accessible through OBIS-SEAMAP at <http://seamap.env.duke.edu/>—significantly expands conservationists' understanding of habitat use, helping them monitor stock recovery and safeguard the turtles' habitat in new and collaborative ways.



Text and map courtesy of Wendy Dow and Karen Eckert at WIDECAST