

# Trade in Hawksbill Shell

## STILL ACTIVE GLOBALLY

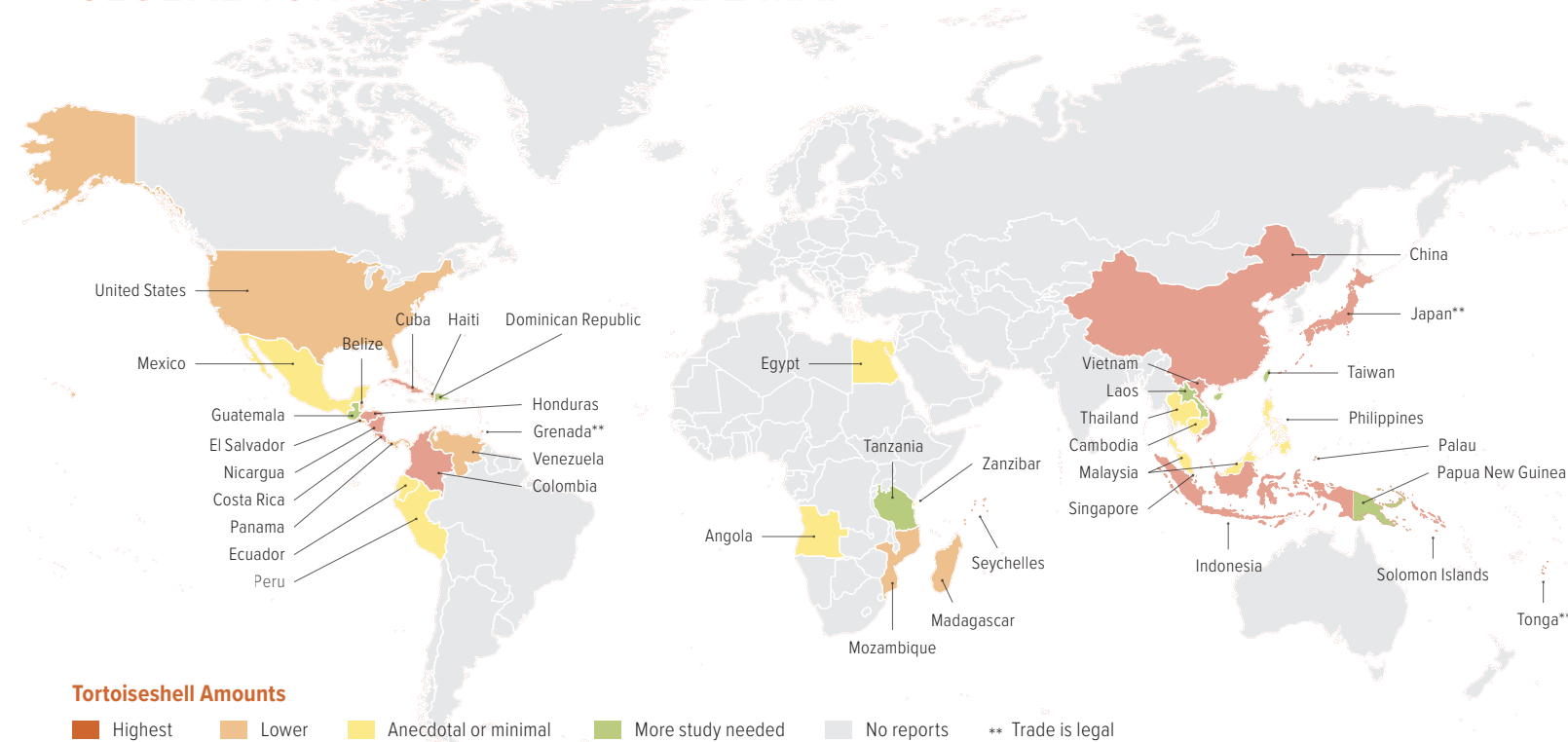
By Brad Nahill

The hawksbill shell industry thrives despite decades of communications and policy efforts to eradicate it. *Too Rare to Wear* is a coalition of more than 150 conservation organizations and tourism companies led by the nonprofit SEE Turtles, which is dedicated to ending this threat. A recent report revealed that fully 40 countries still have an active trade in tortoise shell (hawksbill turtle) products. Researchers conservatively estimate that more than 45,000 such items have been documented for sale worldwide since 2017, both online and in shops. At least 10 countries (most notably Indonesia) still have significant illegal markets, 30 others participate in minor trade, and 7 countries require additional investigation (including the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Papua New Guinea).

### HISTORY OF TORTOISESHELL TRADE

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| <b>~45 AD</b><br>Julius Caesar held warehouses of tortoiseshell in Alexandria, Egypt. | <b>IX</b><br>Tortoiseshell was traded by Arabs throughout the Indian Ocean. | <b>1500–1700s</b><br>Tortoiseshell trade expands globally, driven by European colonization and trade by Portugal, France, England, and the Netherlands. | <b>1700s</b><br>Japan's bekko artisans are established in Nagasaki. | <b>1800–1900s</b><br>Trade in Central America and Caribbean intensifies. | <b>1975</b><br>Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) Treaty goes into force. | <b>1977</b><br>Hawksbills is added to Appendix I of CITES. | <b>Late 1970s</b><br>45 countries trade tortoiseshell, with Japan importing an average of 37,700 turtles per year. | <b>1980</b><br>Japan joins CITES and takes exception and reduces quota to 28,300 turtles per year. | <b>1987</b><br>Report by Milliken and Tokunaga documents continued trade between CITES countries without proper documents. | <b>1990</b><br>Japan reduces quote to 18,870 turtles per year. | <b>1993</b><br>Japan establishes zero quota to avoid an embargo by the United States, and Cuba reduces annual fishery quota from 5,000 to 500 in response. | <b>1994</b><br>Japan drops its reservation to the treaty. | <b>1997</b><br>Cuba proposes to sell stockpile to Japan and continue international trade through CITES, but the proposal fails. | <b>1998</b><br>Seychelles and Zanzibar acquire tortoiseshell stocks from artisans and burn them to demonstrate their commitment to ending the trade. | <b>2000</b><br>Cuba proposes again to sell stockpile to Japan and continue international trade through CITES, but the proposal fails. | <b>2007</b><br>Cuba instates voluntary moratorium on its hawksbill fishery, though the country still maintains its reservation to the treaty and stockpile. | <b>2019</b><br>Illegal tortoiseshell trade continues in at least 40 countries and the trade remains legal in at least 3 countries or territories. |
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### GLOBAL TORTOISESHELL TRADE MAP



In its comprehensive 2020 report titled “The Global Tortoiseshell Trade,” *Too Rare to Wear* drew from numerous sources and relied on data from past studies, news stories, and first-person accounts, as well as from a large 2019 survey conducted by the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and from its own 2017 report titled “Endangered Souvenirs.” The 2017 report demonstrated that although hawksbill trade has declined in many countries (CITES banned legal trade among its signatories in 1977, though some parties held reservations to the ban until the 1990s), that trade continues to be a leading threat to the species, which is listed as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The report highlights many recent examples, including the following:

- Research by the Monterey Bay Aquarium (U.S.A.) estimated that 9 million turtles were traded globally between 1844 and 1992, thereby decimating hawksbill populations.
- Evidence was published by the Japan Tiger and Elephant Fund about illegal hawksbill sales in that country, including 33 imports from 2016 to 2019—despite the fact that government subsidies for the legal domestic market were ended in 2016.
- A report from Nicaragua documented that active legal hawksbill sales are continuing unabated. A rapid assessment in January 2020 at two markets, Masaya and Roberto Huembes, found 45 stalls with an estimated 2,250 products identified.

- A survey conducted by PROFAUNA and Yayasan Penyulu Indonesia identified more than 400 hawksbill products at 23 shops, as well as 22 online sites with approximately 200 accounts selling a shocking 30,000 hawksbill items that had an estimated value of more than US\$30,000.

The good news, however, is that the trade is coming under control in some areas. The Colombian organization Fundación Tortugas del Mar noted that Cartagena, Colombia, which is the second largest hawksbill products market in the Western Hemisphere, recorded an 80 percent drop in hawksbill product sales following years of work to educate consumers and engage local government and law enforcement agencies. In addition, significant increases in hawksbill nesting on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula and on Panama’s northern Caribbean shores roughly coincide with the end of the legal trade in 1994.

Please join with *Too Rare to Wear* and the hundreds of concerned citizens and institutions now working steadfastly to reduce demand for hawksbill turtle products through education, outreach, and creation of policy and enforcement frameworks; together we can stamp out this global threat. •

AT LEFT: A bracelet made from a hawksbill turtle shell in Nicaragua, where recent market surveys found that illegal trade in hawksbill products is still rampant. © Hal Brindley/TravelForWildlife.com

Sources: IUCN Red List and The State of the World’s Turtles (SWOT)