



Policy Changes Protect Sea Turtles in The Bahamas: Long-term Efforts Rewarded

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Sea turtles from throughout the Greater Caribbean come to the extensive shallow banks of The Bahamas archipelago to feed. Until recently, the exploitation of sea turtles was still legal under Bahamian law (except for hawksbills, which have been protected since 1986). In September 2009, an important victory for the protection of sea turtles occurred when the government of The Bahamas declared a complete ban on the directed take of sea turtles:

The Fisheries Regulations governing marine turtles have been amended to give full protection to all marine turtles found in Bahamian waters by prohibiting the harvesting, possession, purchase, and sale of turtles, their parts, and eggs. The new regulations also prohibit the molestation of marine turtle nests.... The commitment to the conservation and preservation of these species while in Bahamian waters has been demonstrated by the introduction of protective measures and safeguards over the past two decades, starting with the actions taken to safeguard the hawksbill turtle in 1986.

Although political will was the essential force behind this victory, decades of research and education laid the groundwork for this success, and they serve as an example of how conservation can be driven by the long-term contributions of many people and organizations from a variety of sectors. For the past 30 years, we have conducted research on the biology and distribution of sea turtles in The Bahamas, in collaboration with the Bahamas National Trust. Our results have demonstrated the need to end the adverse effects of exploitation on turtle populations. We have worked with the Department of Marine Resources and several nongovernmental organizations, including the Bahamas National Trust, the Bahamas Reef Environment Educational

Foundation, The Nature Conservancy Bahamas Program, WIDECAST, the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, and the Bahamas Sea Turtle Conservation Group, which have all been working to improve protection for sea turtles in The Bahamas. During this time, conservation awareness has been on the rise throughout the archipelago thanks to education efforts in many schools and at community meetings. Through these long-term efforts, the stage was set for total protection of sea turtles.

In 2008, the tipping point occurred on Easter Sunday, when a particularly egregious case of cruelty to an adult loggerhead turtle along a major roadway in Nassau was viewed by hundreds of people and was featured in local newspapers. This incident and the resulting public outcry initiated a grassroots effort by the Bahamas Sea Turtle Conservation Group that included an international e-mail campaign and, ultimately, proved effective in creating the political will that led to the new regulations.

Policy change is an important step. However, just as it has taken decades to arrive at this important juncture, it will take a continued commitment to ensure that such legislative changes become a reality. Enforcement of the ban in this nation of 700 islands will be challenging, and monitoring of the ban's effectiveness will be especially important in the years ahead. With support from the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund, we have been monitoring populations in foraging areas throughout The Bahamas for many years, and we will use these studies as baselines to assess changes in abundance and distribution of sea turtles.

The important past efforts of local and international scientists, conservationists, policymakers, educators, activists, and citizens must remain strong into the future, and education will be critical to the ban's long-term success. We hope that the leadership demonstrated by the government of The Bahamas serves as an example for other nations throughout the Caribbean, and throughout the world, in which sea turtles remain in need of protection. ■

THIS PAGE: Five of the world's seven species of sea turtles are found in The Bahamas, a sprawling archipelago covering more than 10,000 square kilometers (3,861 square miles). © AIRPHOTO / JIM WARK AT LEFT: Men unload their catch of green turtles in Nassau, The Bahamas, in this image from 1946. As evidenced by this historical photograph, sea turtles have been captured and consumed in The Bahamas for decades, a practice that was legal until 2009. © MARIE HANSEN / TIME & LIFE PICTURES / GETTY IMAGES