

Hawksbill Sea Turtle, Half Moon Caye.  
2013 marks the 20th anniversary of the  
protection of hawksbill sea turtles in Belize.



# SEA TURTLES

A True Marine Flagship Species

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**S**EA TURTLES ARE a charismatic species that encourage divers and snorkelers, biologists and coastal property owners, and citizens and students to work together to “Protect Turtles Today for Tomorrow.” That’s the motto of the Belize Turtle Watch Program as it unites efforts to conserve one of the oldest species on Planet Earth, sea turtles.

The founding premise behind the Belize Turtle Watch Program is to determine the impact of rapid climate change on sea turtles. Some people doubt climate change is occurring but the impacts on sea turtles will be rising sea levels and reduced nesting beaches, altered ocean currents and migration patterns, and increased sand temperature resulting in a greater percentage of female turtles. But before we can measure the impacts of climate change on sea turtles, we need to know how many sea turtles use the beaches, sea grass beds, and coral reefs in Belize. By monitoring their abundance each year, we can monitor impacts of climate change and other threats like illegal fishing and coastal development and try to mitigate, or lessen, these impacts.

Hundreds of miles of sandy beaches that line the coast and off-shore islands are all potentially important nesting habitats for all sea turtles. Sea grass beds are important foraging areas for adult green turtles, while the coral reefs support hawksbill and loggerhead turtles. The green turtles that feed in Belize travel more than 1,500 miles to their nesting beach in Costa Rica every two to three years. Hawksbill turtles that nest in Mexico forage on the reefs in Belize. So while we are conserving and protecting the turtles in Belize, our efforts also impact sea turtle populations in other countries.

Marine park managers like the Belize Fisheries Department, Belize Audubon Society, SEA, and TIDE regularly monitor nesting and hatching activity within the marine protected areas. Through the Belize Turtle Watch Program, coastal residents have “Adopted A Beach.” They monitor their beach for sea turtle activity to quantify the number of sea turtles that nest so that changes over time can be measured.

Dive shops and marine guides can also “Adopt A Reef.” As part of the initiative, guides and their guests report all sightings of sea turtles and submit their photographs online. The images are then used in a photo identification program to identify migration patterns of turtles at dive and snorkel sites within Belize. Even visitors can participate by monitoring their coastal resort’s beaches and sharing observations made along the reef. In order to determine abundance, it is just as important to record non-sightings. While this is not as much fun, such data are crucial. At the end of each year, an annual report is compiled so that impact can be measured and the effects of rapid climate change and other threats can be addressed.

ECOMAR has prepared a variety of tools to help volunteers with the Belize Turtle Watch Program participate. These include a training DVD, calendars, stickers, and fact sheets. To find out more about how you can get involved in “Protecting Turtles Today for Tomorrow,” please visit [www.ecomarbelize.org](http://www.ecomarbelize.org) and become a volunteer today!