

The Elusive Hawksbill Turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) of The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

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The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) protects over 2,900 sq. miles of marine habitats in the waters of Monroe County, Florida. Among the diverse array of species to be found within its boundaries, hawksbill turtles are regularly observed on or near shallow hard bottom and/or coral reef habitats. However, no large-scale effort had ever been undertaken to seek details concerning their relative abundance or distribution. In an effort to fill in data gaps for this species in Florida, approximately 300 hours of in-water surveys were conducted across 70 reef sites from Key Largo through the Marquesas Keys. Over a ten year period, 61 hawksbill turtles were hand captured, weighed, measured, and sampled, in some cases multiple times. Body sizes ranged from 18.8 cm - 75.3 cm straight carapace length at minimum (SCL) with an average of 38.1 cm $\pm$ 10.2 cm SD. Hawksbill growth rates were calculated from 10 recapture events that occurred among 9 individuals, which ranged in size from 29.3 - 46.0 cm straight carapace length, and averaged 6.16 cm/y $\pm$ 2.35 cm/y SD (SCL). Preliminary results indicate that small juveniles temporarily take up residence in the shallow rocky habitats of the Sanctuary as they make the shift from pelagic to nearshore environments, likely arriving via prevailing oceanic currents. As such, these locations represent key entry points for successive generations of young hawksbills integrating into Florida's larger reef ecosystems, where they may remain until reaching adulthood. Here, we provide a summary of our data concerning the abundance, distribution, growth rate, and behavior of immature hawksbill turtles in the FKNMS.