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## Ambassadors of Guyana: Sea Turtles

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Oceans are often considered as the Giver of Life in many cultures around the World. Out of its watery depth stumbled the lumbering form of the most ancient living species – the sea turtles. Sea turtles have long featured prominently in the cultural, social and economic life of residents, particularly in the Northwestern Region of Guyana. Amerindian communities within this Region identify the starting of the sea turtle season by reading the ‘milky’ formation of the stars in the night skies.

From March to August every year, Guyana hosts one of the most spectacular natural events. Shell Beach, a relatively remote stretch of 90-mile long beach, is the only place in Guyana where four of the world’s endangered species of marine turtles, Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), Green (*Chelonia mydas*), Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), come to lay their eggs. Shell Beach, as the name suggests, consists entirely of shells in various degrees of fragmentation. The billions of shell fragments, washed ashore by tidal influences, act as natural nurseries for the eggs of the sea turtles.

Added to the cultural significance of sea turtles, residents from the Almond Beach, Waramuri and Santa Rosa communities traditionally hunted sea turtles, utilizing their meats, eggs and shells for both food and profit. However, unlike the days when sea turtles commonly lived to a century or more, they are presently threatened with extinction as a result of many human-related activities - poaching of eggs, hunting for their meat and incidental capture in fishing nets. The pressure is getting worse, and sea turtle meat and eggs, for a long time sold clandestinely in the North-western villages, are now for sale in the capital city of Georgetown.



Leatherback



Hawksbill



Olive Ridley



Green Turtle

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In order to highlight these threats and encourage even greater public support for these extraordinary marine creatures around the World, the United Nations has designated 2006 as the 'Year of Sea Turtles'.

In a statement read out during the 'Year of Sea Turtles' launch, Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado of Japan emphasized that, "Sea turtles are modern ambassadors of our oceans, linking countries and communities around the world. They are many things to many people: a traditional source of food, the basis of livelihoods centred on sustainable tourism, a focus of investigative research, or simply an enduring source of inspiration and awe. We all have a common interest in their conservation."

It is out of this understanding of sea turtle that Guyana must recognize its situation nationally, regionally and globally, and in the context of the ecological and social structures that must guide our sea turtle conservation efforts. Ultimately the fate of Guyana's sea turtle population depends on each of us.

### **EVERYONE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY IN PROTECTING GUYANA'S SEA TURTLES**

- Don't purchase sea turtle products including their meat, eggs, or items made from their shells or leather.
- Don't shine lights at turtles, overturn or ride turtles, disturb nests, or collect eggs or hatchlings
- Check fishing nets every 3-4 hours to ensure that turtles are not accidentally caught and drowned
- Sea turtles must surface to breathe so watch for them as they can be struck and killed by engine boats
- Do not dump plastics and garbage into the Oceans or on beaches. Leatherbacks can mistake plastic items for jellyfish, a favourite food, which can block air passages and lead to death.
- Support the 'No Netting Zones' at Shell Beach, which are areas along the beach where peak nesting of sea turtles occur. In these zones, fishermen are asked not to use their long seines, which sometimes extend to 2-3 miles, as turtles can become entangled and thus drown in them.
- Tell your friendly sea turtle wardens of sea turtles trapped in nets or persons hunting sea turtles or poaching their eggs.
- Support your local sea turtle conservation programme e.g. volunteering for projects, monetary support, etc.
- Share this information with family and friends!