

Tourists, Turtles and Trinkets

**A Look at the Trade in Marine Turtle Products in
the Dominican Republic and Colombia**

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A Report from the Field

By

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Summary

The Dominican Republic and the Caribbean coastline of Colombia have a long history of use of marine turtles for both local consumption (turtle eggs, meat and oil) and for crafting into ornamental products such as jewellery, mainly for the tourist market. In March 2006 TRAFFIC investigated the trade in these marine turtle products, with a focus on Hawksbill Turtle shell items, in the Dominican Republic and Colombia, which have become popular tourist destinations. Research results show that trade and availability of marine turtle items in these Caribbean countries is an issue of concern, and might indicate ongoing illegal take and trade in marine turtles. Hawksbill Turtle shell products for sale were found in both countries, with very large quantities sold openly in the Dominican Republic, and significantly less for sale in Colombia.

In the Dominican Republic, seven locations were visited, with large quantities of Hawksbill Turtle shell items sold in street stalls, souvenir shops, markets and jewellery shops. A total of 414 curio and souvenir shops and stalls were investigated, with 249 of these trading in Hawksbill Turtle products. Santo Domingo was found to be the main trading spot and distribution centre for these items in the country. Over 95% of the businesses surveyed here traded in marine turtle products, ranging from decorative boxes to elaborate pieces of Hawksbill Turtle shell jewellery, inlaid with gold, amber and gems.

In Colombia, three locations with seven distinct trade areas were visited, with Hawksbill Turtle shell items traded in craft markets, souvenir shops, and by street vendors. A total of 223 shops and vendors were investigated, with 60 of these offering Hawksbill Turtle products for sale. Products were generally available in established shops and stalls, by vendors (walking in the city or along the beaches), and through informal "sidewalk artisans" selling crafts and jewellery items. The old city in Cartagena and El Rodadero in Santa Marta are the places where most of the Hawksbill Turtle shell items were traded. Roadside vendors outside of Cartagena were also seen selling marine turtle eggs.

The evidence from the investigation showed that other marine turtle products, such as turtle oil were also for sale in both countries, including the main tourist markets. The consumption and trade in marine turtle meat was less obvious and for local rather than tourist use.

In 2001 TRAFFIC published a report, "*Swimming Against the Tide*", documenting exploitation of marine turtles in the Northern Caribbean. In that report the Dominican Republic featured as a country of concern. The latest TRAFFIC report "*Turning the Tide: Exploitation, Trade and Management of Marine Turtles of the Lesser Antilles, Central America, Colombia and Venezuela*" documents the exploitation of marine turtles in the Southern Caribbean. The findings of both reports sets a baseline showing problems with trade and this latest investigation in these two Caribbean countries, shows that this is still an issue of concern.

Introduction and Background Information

Marine turtles have been extensively used as a resource for many centuries by numerous cultures around the world. Turtle eggs and most turtle body parts have been valued for one attribute or another, and they have provided everything from basic sustenance to luxury items. Direct exploitation, by-catch and ineffective regulations are just a few of the causes that have contributed to the decline of marine turtle populations. Marine turtle conservation has received international concern, with all marine turtles listed in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Animals and commercial international trade prohibited through the CITES treaty on trade in endangered species. The trade in turtle products can drastically damage wild populations of marine turtles through over-exploitation.

For centuries, craftsmen have worked the thick shell plates from the Hawksbill Turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*. Legal international trade in marine turtles, including the Hawksbill Turtle, has become increasingly restricted in the past quarter-century, as all marine turtles were included in Appendix I of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). No legal international commercial trade in Hawksbill Turtles has occurred since 1992. However, as a result of widespread legal and illegal domestic consumption and trade, some estimates indicate that the population of Hawksbill Turtles has decreased by 80% over the last 100 years.

In response to a recommendation from the First Wider Caribbean Hawksbill Turtle Range State Dialogue Meeting (Mexico City, May 2001), CITES commissioned TRAFFIC to undertake a review of the status of exploitation, trade and management of marine turtles in the Lesser Antilles and the Caribbean regions of Central America, Colombia and Venezuela. This review was conceived to complement the TRAFFIC North America marine turtle study *Swimming Against the Tide: Recent Surveys of Exploitation, Trade and Management of Marine Turtles in the Northern Caribbean*, published in April 2001.

As a supplement to this review, a rapid field investigation into trade in marine turtle products, with a focus on Hawksbill Turtle shell items was undertaken by TRAFFIC in March 2006. Colombia and the Dominican Republic were chosen for the survey based upon priorities identified previously, to get the most up to date information to verify that the findings of earlier research still held true and to give contrast based on two very different countries in terms of location, tourist trade type and local use.

What TRAFFIC Wanted to Achieve

TRAFFIC's research aimed to determine the scale and scope of the availability of marine turtle products, parts and derivatives for local and tourist markets in the Dominican Republic and Colombia. The focus was primarily on Hawksbill Turtle shell products in places with high levels of tourism. Understanding the trade dynamics helps TRAFFIC to formulate solutions to the problems TRAFFIC identifies, working with governments, traders and the tourist sector.

How TRAFFIC Researched the Trade

Information was obtained through site visits and direct observation of local markets, souvenir and jewellery shops, and street vendors in three locations in Colombia, and seven locations in the Dominican Republic. Assessing the quantity of marine turtle items on display in the different locations presented a problem, as the volume of products displayed was substantial. Many of the shop owners were also suspicious of individuals discussing trade issues and not buying products. As the range of products was diverse, from whole shells to a myriad of tiny trinkets, counting every product at each site was impractical. However, photographs and video taken at each shop supported the subsequent analysis of the notes taken immediately after surveying each shop or stall. The total number of products available per country by type was extrapolated by averaging the number of products seen at each shop where good video and photographic coverage was made and then multiplying this amount by the number of shops that sold these products. Most shops roughly stocked the same product types and number of products. Adjustments were made for those shops or vendors that did not fit within the normal average range.

The trading places investigated during the survey

Dominican Republic	Colombia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Santo Domingo <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Modelo market ○ El Conde St. ○ Isabel la Católica St. ○ International Airport • Boca Chica • La Romana • Bayehibe • Puerto Plata • Sosúa • Cabarete 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cartagena <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bocagrande beach ○ El Laguito beach ○ Old City ○ Playa Blanca, Baru Island • Santa Marta <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Santa Marta City ○ El Rodadero • Riohacha

Maps of the trading places investigated in Colombia and the Dominican Republic



The Scale of the Trade

Results of this survey clearly show an existing large scale trade in marine turtle products in the Dominican Republic, with a comparatively lower number of items offered for sale in Colombia. Most of the trade in the sites surveyed traded in Hawksbill Turtle shell manufactured items, ranging from finger rings weighing a mere few grams, to women’s purses, plates, stuffed turtles or polished shells.

The weight of the products ranged from a few grams to a few kilos. During the survey it was estimated that over 50,000 Hawksbill Turtle items were openly available for sale. This volume accounts for a significant number of turtles being used for shell as well as other products such as oil, meat or eggs. There is also information from local vendors that there is a continuing demand by both local buyers and foreigners. The turnover of the sale of items was hard to determine but during the survey on many occasions sales were witnessed, particularly by tourists. The scale of this trade is potentially therefore a particular concern for marine turtle conservation.

	Dominican Republic	Colombia
Number of shops & vendors surveyed	414	223
Number of shops & vendors selling marine turtle products	249	63
Estimated number of marine turtle products for sale	50,000	1,500

The range and availability of over 50,000 marine turtle products for sale in the Dominican Republic and Colombia

Product Availability: Very Common	Product Availability: Common	Product Availability: Uncommon
 <p><i>Hair band Hair pin Finger ring Ear rings Necklace Women's purse Pendant Turtle oil (500 ml) Ornamental box: wood / shell Bracelet</i></p>	 <p><i>Bracelet: silver / shell Finger ring: silver / shell Key chain Plate Necklace: silver / shell Broche Pen holder Turtle meat (request only) Cheese board: wood / shell Picture frame: wood / shell "Peineta"</i></p>	 <p><i>Bracelet gold / shell Comb Spectacle frame Guitar pick Cigarette pack case Necklace gold / shell Tray Salad set (fork / spoon) Spoon / fork / knife Shirt button Stuffed turtle Polished carapace Hair clip</i></p>

Colombia

In the Caribbean, Colombian territory extends over 1650km of coastline and a very large area of open ocean. The communities living along the Caribbean coast of Colombia have always used marine turtles as a source of protein. Although marine turtles have been protected by law in Colombia from commercial exploitation since 1978, exploitation has continued in the form of legal, unregulated subsistence harvesting and illegal take that results in the commercial use of turtles.

Out of a total of 223 traders surveyed, the investigation identified more than 60 traders in the Colombian Caribbean that were trading in marine turtle products. That is nearly 30 percent of all the traders considered. Most of the open trade of marine turtle products observed was Hawksbill Turtle shell, in a wide range of finished product forms.

Proportion of shops / vendors surveyed that sold marine turtle items

Number of shops / vendors surveyed	223
Number of shops / vendors selling marine turtle products	63
Percentage of shops / vendors selling marine turtle products	30%
Estimated number of marine turtle products for sale	1,500

Most of the trade was in Hawksbill Turtle shell items



Turtle meat is available to trusted customers by request in markets and butcheries along the Colombian Caribbean. Additionally, turtle oil was traded in one of the sites surveyed. Outside of Cartagena marine turtle eggs were offered for sale along the roadside.

Marine turtle oil offered in El Rodadero, Santa Marta, Colombia (note the sign)



Hawksbill Turtle shell items were sold either in established souvenir and gift shops, or by street vendors along streets frequented by tourists or the beaches.

Marine turtle products were traded by vendors or shops



Cartagena is the central point for international tourism in the area, and while marine turtle products aimed at this particular clientele were largely available, it was interesting to note that other sites such as El Rodadero in Santa Marta, with a much higher proportion of tourists from within Colombia, showed significant numbers of Hawksbill Turtle shell items openly for sale as well.

Items for sale in El Rodadero, Santa Marta



At Riohacha there is an established marine turtle conservation project in Los Flamencos National Park. Awareness materials and outreach efforts promoting marine turtle conservation in the neighbouring areas were ongoing. The local authorities were strictly prohibiting any commercial use of marine turtles in the vicinity.

A marine turtle conservation project in Los Flamencos National Park



Promoting marine turtle conservation in Riohacha, La Guajira



Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic occupies the central and eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, the second largest island in the Caribbean, with a total land area of 48,442 square kilometres (18,632 square miles) and a 1,288 kilometre coastline. Four species of marine turtles nest in the country: leatherbacks, hawksbills, greens, and loggerheads, which are currently protected by Decree 801-2002 which prohibits the capture of wild animals in the national territory including marine turtles. However, available information indicates that historically abundant populations of marine turtles in the Dominican Republic have been reduced to a remnant of their former size, mostly due to overexploitation.

Out of a total of 414 shops and vendors investigated, 249 were trading in marine turtle products. That is 60 percent of all traders surveyed. Even though turtle meat is available to trusted customers by request in markets and butcheries, most of the open trade in marine turtle products was in Hawksbill Turtle shell items and turtle oil. Turtle oil is sold in bottles labelled "*Aceite de Tortuga*" and offered in a few souvenir shops, but more commonly in "Botánicas" which are stalls and shops offering traditional medicine products, mostly found in markets. Turtle oil is usually sold as a skin care product.

Proportion of shops / vendors surveyed that sold marine turtle items

Number of shops / vendors surveyed	414
Number of shops / vendors selling marine turtle products	249
Percentage of shops / vendors selling marine turtle products	60%
Estimated number of marine turtle products for sale	50,000

“Botánicas” stalls offer marine turtle oil among other traditional medicine products



Hawksbill turtle shell items are sold in established shops (souvenir, jewellery), and street stalls along streets frequented by tourists and in markets.

Marine turtle products in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic



Santo Domingo is the major concentration and distribution point for Hawksbill Turtle shell products, with 95% of the businesses / vendors surveyed offering these items. The majority were traded to international tourists in the Modelo market, El Conde, and Isabel la Católica Streets.

Hawksbill shell items for sale along El Conde Street, note "Carey" (Hawksbill Turtle in the Spanish language) written on a sign for a shop on this location



Santo Domingo is the major concentration and distribution spot for marine turtle products in the country. Other significant hotspots can be found, such as La Romana, where Hawksbill Turtle shell products are offered to foreign tourists, mostly coming from nearby resorts, or tourists that visit certain shops as a scheduled stop on day tours from cruise ships.

Marine turtle products for sale in La Romana, Dominican Republic



Why is this a problem?

The sale of marine turtle items to international tourists in many of the sites surveyed is perpetuating an international trade that may contravene international laws such as CITES and national laws in the countries the tourists return to. Through observation and conversations with shop owners, a large proportion of purchases are made by international tourists. When buying marine turtle products the tourists are not provided with any certification that legalizes the trade in any way. Most of the tourists in the Dominican Republic are from Europe and the United States where the import of marine turtle items is illegal and not exempted for personal use. The trade is not regulated and the scale of consumption is potentially significant, considering the levels of availability and the tourist trade in the Dominican Republic in particular.

Even though subsistence fishing of marine turtles is permitted by law in Colombia, the existence of open sales of Hawksbill Turtle shell items in several of the sites surveyed indicates that commercial use of the turtles is occurring, which might be violating national legislation. In the case of the Dominican Republic, the extensive presence of open retail displays of Hawksbill Turtle shell items and other marine turtle products in all of the sites surveyed violates the national Decree 801-2002, which prohibits the capture of wild animals in the national territory.

What needs to happen now

TRAFFIC recommends a number of steps be taken now to try to deter the illegal harvest and trade in marine turtles in these countries.

- Government agency enforcement of national and international laws that protect marine turtles needs to be effectively implemented, including tackling the domestic illegal trade and increasing efforts to detect and prevent smuggling of Hawksbill Turtle products from the Dominican Republic and Colombia.
- Efforts by the government authorities, research institutes and non-governmental organizations in the Dominican Republic and Colombia to address illegal exploitation and trade in Hawksbill Turtles and their parts should be supported and expanded.
- Public education and awareness, aimed at both traders and buyers, regarding existing legislation and the conservation of marine turtles, should be initiated in key trade sites and strengthened in sites where current efforts are underway.
- Campaigns to discourage potential buyers of Hawksbill Turtle products and making international travellers aware of the laws forbidding the international trade and transport of these products should be a priority, with particular attention given to the cruise ship and “all inclusive” tourism industry.
- Countries with major tourism to the Dominican Republic should increase their public outreach on the legal status of marine turtles and existing trade regulations, as well as their inspection efforts of airline baggage from that destination to act as a deterrent.
- The domestic markets for eggs and meat need to be thoroughly investigated to shed light on the demand and levels of the marine turtle harvest. National conservation strategies for marine turtles should be adapted as necessary to respond to findings of the investigation.

