

Turtles of the Seychelles

by Christophe Mason-Parker

The Seychelles is made up 115 islands dotted across the western Indian Ocean. They are split between the mainly uninhabited outer islands, and the inner islands, which are home to the majority of the population of 89 thousand people. Most of the inhabitants live on one of the three main granitic islands of Mahé, Praslin and La Digue.

The inner islands sit on the Mahé plateau, a raised area of seabed with shallow waters and ideal conditions for the growth of coral reefs and seagrass beds. The warm, clear waters surrounding the islands white sandy beaches are home to a huge diversity of marine life including marine turtles.

Although there are five species of turtle found in Seychelles waters, it is only the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) that nest on the islands shores. Globally both species have seen their numbers decline with the hawksbill listed as 'critically endangered' on the IUCN Red List, while the green turtle is listed as 'endangered'. The Seychelles hawksbill population is the largest remaining in the Indian Ocean,

and is one of only five populations worldwide that still have more than one thousand females nesting annually.

Within the Seychelles there is a long tradition of harvesting marine turtles, and green turtles remained an important food source up until the mid 1990s. In addition to their meat, the glutinous layer known as 'Calipee', found beneath the lower shell of the animal, was considered a delicacy. Though the prevalence of biotoxins within the flesh meant hawksbills were never a preferred food choice, the animals were not spared as their shells were highly prized within the local and illegal international markets where they were made into jewelry and ornaments.

The idyllic Beau Vallon Bay with its many dive sites is the perfect place to find both green and hawksbill turtles. Canon 7D, Sigma 10-20mm, ISO 160, f/8, 1/400

A green turtle feeding on seagrass. Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm, Ikelite housing and single Ikelite DS160 strobe. ISO 125, f/10, 1/250





A hawksbill turtle begins the process of covering her nest. Canon 7D, Canon 55-250mm. ISO 400, f/5.6, 1/1000

Although the economic value placed on turtles created a lucrative market for their products, the Seychelles has a commitment to conservation. Since 1994, sea turtles have been afforded full protection under Seychelles law, and it is illegal to kill, possess or eat turtle meat. Though small scale poaching does still occur, the main threats to local turtle populations today include coastal development, pollution, and entanglement in longlines and fishing nets.

Fortunately, the protection afforded to marine turtles within the Seychelles over the last two decades has meant that they are now regularly seen in the waters around the inner islands. On the island of Mahé hawksbill turtles are encountered on most dives and usually allow divers to approach closely. The majority of the island's dive centres are found in the village of Beau Vallon on the north coast of the island. It is the perfect place to base your self with easy access to nearby dive sites and good



A hawksbill hatchling makes the journey towards the waters edge. Canon 550D, Canon 55-250mm. ISO 800, f/5.7, 1/100

snorkeling off the beach.

Beau Vallon bay is a shallow sweeping bay lined with a perfect coconut fringed beach. Within the bay a patchwork of coral reef provides several dive sites, all of approximately fourteen metres in depth. The coral reef is vibrant and healthy and it is not unusual to observe a hawksbill turtle or two on every dive. Often they will be found on the reef with their heads buried in a coral thicket, oblivious to all that is going on around them. Hawksbill's are easily recognised by

their pointed beak and the jagged edge of their carapace. They are usually associated with coral reefs where they feed on sponges, tunicates and jellyfish.

The Baie Ternay Marine National Park, a five minute boat journey to the north of Beau Vallon is a particularly good location for spotting turtles. Whether diving or snorkeling, this stunning bay is home to several hawksbill turtles as well as a couple of greens and the healthy coral reef acts as a perfect backdrop for wide angle

photography. During daylight hours, the turtles are often found resting on the reef between five and ten metres and can easily be approached with a little patience.

Around the three main islands, sightings of green turtles are less frequent than those of hawksbills, though by no means rare. Greens, however, tend to be wearier of divers and for those wishing to get up close and personal with green turtles then a trip to Bird Island should definitely be on the itinerary.

Bird Island is the most northerly of the Seychelles islands and is a thirty minute plane ride from Mahe. This tiny coralline island is home to thousands of Sooty Terns, which breed during the south-easterly trade winds. The powder white beaches are important nesting sites for hawksbill turtles, while in recent years a population of green turtles has taken up residence in the shallow waters alongside the island's coastline.

There is no dive centre on Bird Island but this is not a problem as the turtles can only be reached by snorkelling. In fact they are always in the same location a few yards from the shore and in only two metres of water. The size of the population is unknown but there are usually a dozen green turtles at any one time in an area the size of a football pitch.

The green turtles appear on a rising tide, venturing into the shallows to visit the seagrass beds that hug the shore. They spend hours consuming vast quantities of nutrient poor *Thalassia* before heading back out onto the reef as the tide recedes. The population is made up of both adults and juveniles, and over time certain individuals have become habituated to the presence of humans. The turtles lack of fear and their tolerance of snorkelers



A green turtle takes a breath of air. Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm, Ikelite housing and single Ikelite DS160 strobe. ISO 200, f/13, 1/250

allows for close up encounters over sustained periods of time.

When completely relaxed or sleeping, green turtles can remain underwater for a considerable amount of time. The need to breathe is stronger when feeding and they tend to surface every five minutes or so. There is a direct correlation between breath holding ability and stress, so if an animal is repeatedly surfacing to breathe it means it is time to back off and give it some space. Normally, with a little patience it is easy enough to find a green turtle



The shallow water and seagrass beds provide perfect conditions for split level photography. Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm, Ikelite housing and single Ikelite DS160 strobe. ISO 125, f/16, 1/200

that accepts your presence and will allow you to remain with it for hours on end.

Due to the turtles close proximity to the shore and the shallow depth of the water, it is an excellent opportunity to try split level shots. The shallow,



The hawksbill turtle has a distinctive, bird-like beak. Canon G12, internal flash. ISO 100, f/4.5, 1/1000

clear water means there is also plenty of natural light but you may wish to bring a strobe for those sunburst shots.

When you have had enough of the green turtles (or more likely when your battery is empty or your memory card full) and if you time it right, the Seychelles offers plenty of opportunities to photograph turtles above the water.



A single strobe adds colour to a green turtle positioned in front of the afternoon sun. Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm, Ikelite housing and single Ikelite DS160 strobe. ISO 125, f/11, 1/400

The Seychelles is one of a handful of locations where hawksbill turtles nest during daylight hours. During the last quarter of the year hawksbill turtles return to the beaches of their birth to lay their eggs. Nesting season starts to slow down around the start of the new year, and it is usually around this time that the hatchlings start to appear.

Although coastal development has impacted heavily on turtle nesting beaches on the main islands, there are still a few beaches on the south of Mahé where the animals return each year. The beaches contain information boards highlighting turtle conservation initiatives as well as a code of conduct for observers to follow.

Those wishing to maximise their chances of photographing nesting turtles should head to one of the smaller islands such as Bird, Cousin or Curieuse. These islands are a short journey from Mahé or Praslin and all have active turtle conservation programmes.

In the face of numerous anthropogenic pressures, marine turtle numbers continue to decline globally and these enigmatic creatures are becoming a less frequent sight on our reefs. Whilst the turtles of the Seychelles have faced their own share of threats over the years they have managed to survive, and through the hard work and dedication of various NGOs, as well as the foresight of the Seychelles government, hopefully they will be here for years to come.

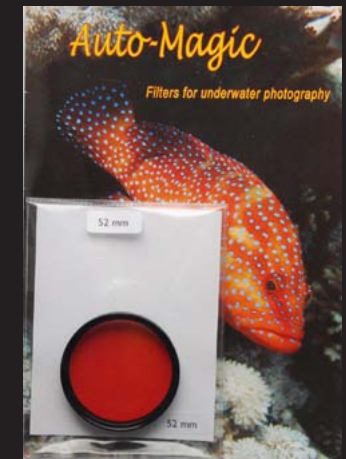


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