SSN SPECIES SURVIVAL NETWORK

CITES 2002

Hawksbill Turtle

Eretmochelys imbricata

Prop. 12.30 (Cuba) Transfer of the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) population in Cuban waters from Appendix I to Appendix II for the purpose of exporting 7.8 tons of stockpiled hawksbill shell scutes, accumulated legally from its national conservation and management programme between 1993 and 2002, annotated as follows:

a) the export will not take place until the CITES Secretariat has verified, within 12 months of the decision, that the importing country has adequate internal trade controls and will not re-export and the CITES Standing Committee accepts this verification; and

b) the wild population in Cuban waters will continue to be managed as an Appendix-I species.

SSN VIEW: Oppose Adoption of Proposal

- Hawksbill turtles are Critically Endangered (IUCN 2000).
- A maximum of 5,000 hawksbills nest annually in the Caribbean region.
- There is no separate or unique Cuban hawksbill population. Many turtles derive from nesting sites in other countries where populations are depleted or in the process of recovery.
- Resolution Conf. 9.24, Annex 3, recommends against split-listing species because of the enforcement problems it creates.
- Cuba's shell stockpile comes from both resident (Cuban-nesting) and immigrant specimens. Cuba stopped the harvest on their resident population while continuing to harvest immigrant hawksbills.
- A correlation between increased numbers of nests in several Caribbean countries and the 1993 moratorium on the import of hawksbill scutes to Japan, along with decreased harvest in Cuba, has been noted; Cuban scientists accept that Cuba's past harvest may have affected the recovery of hawksbills in the region.
- After Japan's tortoiseshell market was closed (1993), illegal trade decreased; if trade were to resume, illegal trade might again increase, further threatening depleted populations.
- TRAFFIC has observed that, in Japan -the most likely importing country- it is not possible to distinguish the source of tortoiseshell after processing or at the retail level.
- Sea turtle biologists have expressed concern that the trade of hawksbill scutes from Cuba could undermine regional and national hawksbill conservation efforts and encourage other countries (and poachers) to stockpile shells in hope of future sale.
- Similar proposals presented by Cuba were rejected at CITES COP10 (1997) and COP11 (2000).
- Range States Costa Rica, Barbados and the USA have criticized the proposal: Costa Rica commented "the transfer of the hawksbill sea turtle to Appendix II will promote the continuous accumulation and export of tortoiseshell from other nations"; the USA commented that "the resumption of international trade in tortoiseshell would have a catastrophic effect on this species and prevent the recovery of many small or depleted nesting populations". Barbados commented that "the turtles that provided the shells for the stockpile are part of a shared Caribbean population. It is important to note that the turtles from which the shells are derived were caught between 1992-2001 when the species was even more endangered than it is today".

BACKGROUND

Hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) are medium-sized sea turtles, with a hawk-like beak and thick, patterned carapace scutes known as "tortoiseshell" or "bekko". The species has a global distribution, with populations centered around tropical reef areas in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Hawksbills nest in at least 60 nations, and like other sea turtles, migrate considerable distances from nesting grounds to feeding grounds and other habitats. They nest on sandy beaches, and lay multiple clutches of about 150 eggs at 14-15-day intervals, and do not nest again for 2-3 years. They feed on organisms associated with coral reefs, with sponges being the most prominent food source. Hawksbills mature slowly, with an estimated age at sexual maturity of 20-40 years.

HAWKSBILL TURTLES ARE CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

Hawksbills have been exploited for centuries for their tortoiseshell. The intense exploitation of hawksbills for tortoiseshell has resulted in the depletion or dramatic decline of populations worldwide. In 1989, a global status review sponsored by CITES revealed that hawksbill populations were depleted or declining in 56 of 65 geopolitical units in which they are known to occur.

In 1996, the IUCN reclassified the hawksbill sea turtle from **Endangered** to **Critically Endangered** on the international Red List of Threatened Animals. In 2001, the Critically Endangered status was challenged. The

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IUCN Petitions and Standards Subcommittee investigated the challenge and rejected it, reconfirming the species' Critically Endangered status on the basis of global population declines of 80% or more during the last three generations (105 years) and projected declines over the next three generations. Only five populations (Seychelles, Mexico, Indonesia and two in Australia) have more than 1000 females nesting annually.

CONCERNS

A maximum of 5,000 hawksbills nest annually in 35 geopolitical entities in the Caribbean region. An additional 600 hawksbills nest annually in Guyana, French Guiana, Suriname, and Brazil. The Cuban proposal will directly affect all of these populations. In a recent survey of the region, 22 of 26 geopolitical entities that responded, representing 27 populations, reported that hawksbill populations were depleted or declining within their territory. Two other populations (Jumby Bay, Antigua and Buck Island, in the U.S. Virgin Islands) were reported stable but not increasing. Only two jurisdictions, Mexico and Puerto Rico, reported that their hawksbill populations were increasing. Barbados reported possible but unconfirmed increases.

Cuban waters host important feeding grounds for hawksbills: DNA analysis of hawksbill turtles foraging in Cuban waters have indicated that **30-58% of the turtles originate from nesting sites in other countries** where populations are depleted or recovering. Many of these populations have shown strong historical declines over the last half-century. For example, the population at Tortuguero, Costa Rica declined by 82% between 1956 and 2000; the Nicaraguan population declined 92% from 1970-1996; and the population at Chiriqui Beach, Panama declined by 98% from 1950 –1990.

Sea turtle biologists in the region have also expressed concern about Cuban trade undermining conservation efforts and encouraging other countries to stockpile shells in the hope of future sales. Some populations (e.g. Mexico) are still only in early stages of recovery and so it is premature to re-open trade now.

It is estimated that 244,730 turtles were killed to supply reported exports of tortoiseshell from Latin America and the Caribbean between 1970 and 1986. In 1993, Japan withdrew its reservation to the Appendix I listing of hawksbills, ending the legal trade in hawksbill scutes.

After Cuba decreased its harvest in the early 1990's and international trade stopped in the region, several nesting populations increased. At Mona Island in Puerto Rico, annual nest numbers in 2000- 2001 were double those recorded in the 1980's. In Yucatan, Mexico, the density of hawksbill nesting has increased exponentially since 1988-89, which correlates statistically with the reduction in the Cuban harvest. In Barbados, nesting increased in the late 1990's. Even in Doce Leguas, Cuba, nesting increased in the late 1990's. Cuban scientists accept that Cuba's past levels of exploitation (taking about 5,000 hawksbills annually until 1993) may have constrained recovery of hawksbills in the Caribbean.

Recent surveys by TRAFFIC and other organisations have demonstrated that illegal trade in hawksbill scutes and other products continues both nationally and regionally in much of the Caribbean, including Cuba. After Japan's tortoiseshell market was closed (1993), illegal trade decreased; **if trade to Japan were to resume, illegal trade may increase**, further threatening depleted and recovering populations. Japan currently has a stockpile of tortoiseshell that should last 12 to 16 years at the current rate of use (10,000 kg/yr).

SEA TURTLE SCIENTISTS OPPOSE THE CUBAN PROPOSAL

At the 22nd Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation, held 4-7 April 2002 in Miami, Florida, USA, with over 830 participants from 73 countries, a resolution passed by an overwhelming majority concluded that "Re-opening even a restricted international commercial trade in hawksbill products may threaten the recovery of depleted or declining populations of hawksbills worldwide, by encouraging stockpiling of products in the hope of selling them legally or illegally in the future; and all populations of hawksbill sea turtle should therefore be retained on Appendix I of CITES".