

# THE SEA TURTLES of JUMBY BAY:

## A CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY

By Martha Watkins Gilkes

One of the most exclusive resorts in the Caribbean Sea, Jumby Bay, located on a private island off the shores of Antigua, has a unique claim to fame; its own resident population of some 40 to 50 endangered Hawksbill sea turtles. These turtles were most likely born on the same beach they now return to for nesting, as this is the habit of sea turtles. Only females come ashore to nest; males rarely return to land after crawling into the sea as hatchlings.

Since the Jumby Bay Hawksbill Conservation Project officially began in 1987 under the aegis of the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST), scientific direction has been provided by Dr. James Richardson of the Institute of Ecology, University of Georgia. It began in 1986 when conservation-minded John Fuller of Antigua noticed the large concentration of Hawksbills nesting on Pasture Bay, a small sandy beach on the north side of Long Island. Fuller contacted Dr. Richardson, a world-renowned sea turtle expert. It was acknowledged that this was a unique nesting ground, and it would later be confirmed as one of the highest concentrations of nesting Hawksbills in the Caribbean. Thus was born, on this small island a long time love affair between turtles and turtle watchers.

For the past 17 years two young field biologists have been assigned to patrol the 500 metre beach throughout the night, every night, on the hour, for 153 nights between June and November. They look for crawl marks (tracks) in the sand made by mature females (about 20 – 30 years old) who have come ashore to lay their eggs. The biologists then document necessary data.

When a turtle is spotted, a judgment is immediately made regarding the biologists' approach. If they frighten the turtle, she may return to the water without laying her eggs. Once she has dug her nest and begun laying she goes into a 'trance' and can be approached without being disturbed. Basic biologic data is then



*The turtle named SUNRISE goes back to the sea for another four years before returning to lay again*

collected such as carapace (shell) length, number of eggs laid, and a map of the barnacles on her shell. If she is not already tagged, an identification tag is attached to her front flipper. If the turtle is tagged from previous years, tag numbers are noted. Nest locations are recorded so that observations can be recorded during the 55 - 60 day incubation. Several days after natural hatching, the nests are excavated to determine success and release any "stragglers". Data accumulated helps show population changes.

Late July through September is peak nesting time; the turtles typically lay four to five times during the season, with a two-week break in between. One turtle was recorded as nesting seven times in one season. About 150 eggs are laid in each nest, but an estimated 1 in 1000-3000 hatchlings survive to reproductive age. The Hawksbill population worldwide has been threatened mainly by over-harvesting, the collection of eggs, and the loss of nesting habitat. Historically, Hawksbills have been harvested for their beautiful scutes (the plates that cover the shell), which have traditionally been made into "tortoiseshell" jewelry and trinkets. International trade in tortoiseshell is now banned and Hawksbills are listed as endangered under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species).



The project is supported and funded by the Jumby Bay Island Company, with additional donations from Cable and Wireless,

Antigua, which provides funds for educational programmes. In addition to the turtle researchers observing the nesting turtles, the Antigua and Barbuda Environmental Awareness Group (EAG) sponsors excursions to view the nesting during the season. The guests of Jumby Bay Resort also join in the outings.



turtle egg



The author first wrote about this project in THE LIAT ISLANDER in December 1990, some 14 years ago. The project was only 3 years old. In that article it was questioned whether human and turtle could share the same beach. After 17 years the answer is an emphatic YES, as this is one of the most successful turtle projects in the world. It is also the longest running tagging project on Hawksbill turtles worldwide. Reports on the project are regularly presented to the global scientific community. Thanks to this small beach, our understanding of these magnificent creatures and what is needed to safeguard them will help future generations enjoy the turtles and continue this important work.

To visit the site contact the Environmental Awareness Group of Antigua and Barbuda (EAG) at [eag@candw.ag](mailto:eag@candw.ag) or telephone (268) 462-6236. For more on Caribbean sea turtles visit [www.widecast.org](http://www.widecast.org) or [www.scaturtle.org](http://www.scaturtle.org). Donations for this, or any Caribbean sea turtle project, can be made payable to WIDECAST and will reach the Jumby Bay Project. Mail to:

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*Martha Watkins Gilkes is an avid protector of the environment, focusing on marine related conservation. She has written two books on scuba diving published by Macmillan, (Divers Guide to the Eastern Caribbean and Shipwrecks of the Caribbean).*



Turtle researcher Carol Stapleton prepares to document details on nesting turtle

## JUMBY BAY

ANTIGUA, WEST INDIES

ROSEWOOD HOTELS & RESORTS



**LOCATION:** Nestled on a private, 300 acre island 2 miles off the coast of Antigua boasting white sand beaches, crystal clear waters and lush landscapes.

**ACCOMMODATIONS:** 50 luxury suites and villas offering stunning ocean views with easy access to the beach.

**DINING:** 2 restaurants with bars – a casual, open air verandah featuring flavorful Mediterranean fare or an elegant dining experience in an 18th-century English plantation manor.

**RECREATION:** Water sports, snorkeling, diving, deep-sea fishing, tennis, biking, and more.

For information and reservations, contact your travel professional,  
call toll free in North America 888 ROSEWOOD or visit [www.rosewoodhotels.com](http://www.rosewoodhotels.com).

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