

# Cayman Islands: Eco-tourism Protect Local Turtle Population

Tourism could help protect local nesting turtle populations in Cayman Islands, but it can also be destructive, according to researchers. Beachfront lighting can affect turtles a lot. In order to avoid the extinction of turtles, eco-tourism can be a responsible way of protecting these animals. Turtles use beaches for deploying their eggs and they can be an unforgettable experience for tourists, who can see turtle tracks, nests and even females laying eggs.



When baby turtles come out from the sand and when they go to the ocean, the view can be spectacular. Since 1998, the Department of Environment has observed nesting turtle populations and their conclusion is that there has been an increase in green sea turtle nesting. In places like Rum Point and Seven Mile Beach, the increase was even greater, as well as the interaction between turtle hatchlings and humans.

Cayman inhabitants and tourists are enthusiastic about scheduling their next vacation during the turtle nesting season. Experts say that protecting sea turtle nesting populations can be crucial for their survival. Common dangers can be lights from beach houses, hotels and condominiums, because this makes nesting very difficult for females.

Hatchlings guide themselves towards the brightest light after getting out from nests. Normally, natural sources of light like the moon and stars are the main focus, as they reflect into the ocean. The purpose of these is that the hatchlings must reach the water. By going towards artificial light, hatchlings become exposed to risks like dehydration, exhaustion, vulnerability to predators and accidents from vehicles. It is enough for one light source to cause damage and thousands of hatchlings can be killed.



In order to protect turtles, the Department of Environment has strict guidelines which include the use of “friendly lighting”. Female turtles must not be disturbed with the use of bright lights and camera flashes,

because they can end up returning to the ocean without deploying eggs. According to Cayman Islands Tourism Association, many success stories exist from other places, in which tourism departments and environmentalists succeeded to protect turtles without compromising tourism.

Sea turtles only go to the beach in the nesting season for laying eggs. In the rest of their life, they swim in the ocean. In the Cayman Islands, the nesting season is between the months of May and November. After laying their eggs in the sand for one or two hours, females go back to the ocean and leave visible tracks in the sand, which are called batabano.

Hatchlings come out in fifty to sixty days. Survivors live in the ocean for fifteen to twenty years and then they go back to the beach for breeding. This cycle repeats itself on Cayman's beaches since millions of years. In order to protect the disappearing animals Cayman Islands now have the Cayman Turtle Farm, which is visited by 200,000 people each year. This can be achieved through night time turtle nesting tours, in the months of July and August. Tourists have the possibility to observe turtle nesting on the breeding pond beach.



At the farm, there is a salted water lagoon, in which there are captive turtles and visitors have the opportunity to swim with them. People can also find here a turtle release program, which helped around 31,000 turtles to go into the wild. Despite the popularity of the farm, international campaigners have criticized it because of the conditions in which the turtles grow. Some people who work for the World Society for the Protection of Animals have the opinion that the turtle release program on the farm has a negative impact on the wild population of turtles.

In Cayman Islands all three islands are threatened, because turtles lay eggs on all of them. The way tourism and turtle population interact today is important for determining the future of the species. Even for Cayman residents, seeing nesting turtles can be a premiere and this is a consequence of the increase of nesting in the area. The guidelines issued by the Department of Environment have to be respected for avoiding extinction.

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