
TURTLES NO LONGER TURN SOUVENIRS IN DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

March 13, 2009 - Critically endangered hawksbill turtles are no longer being sold as tourist souvenirs in the Dominican Republic after a powerful government campaign cracked down on shops illegally trading such items. More than 99 percent of these souvenirs have been withdrawn or confiscated the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC reported.

A 2006 survey carried out by TRAFFIC found more than 23,000 items made from hawksbill turtles for sale. A February revisit of the same locations revealed a dramatic reduction with only 135 shell items.

The success has been achieved thanks to a widespread government-led action launched in November 2008. The Dominican Republic has encouraged the trade of alternative products such as cow horn or bone to present an alternative to shops trading with these turtles.

“We warmly congratulate the Government of the Dominican Republic on their decisive action that has virtually eliminated the blatant illegal souvenir trade in hawksbill turtle shells,” said Adrian Reuter, TRAFFIC’s Representative in Mexico. “This sets an important conservation example for the region, showing that there are solutions that benefits wildlife and people, especially local communities that rely on tourism.”

Hawksbills are one of three marine turtle species that nest on beaches in the Dominican Republic. Over the last century, millions have been killed for the tortoiseshell markets of Europe, the United States and Asia. Today they are preyed upon by poachers mainly for their shells, which are made into souvenirs sold to millions of tourists who visit the country, mostly from North America and Europe.

Hawksbills are classified by IUCN as Critically Endangered and facing an extremely high risk of global extinction. They are listed under Appendix I of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) along with other marine turtles, which prohibits their international trade.

“With marine turtles around the world being threatened with extinction, we need to maximize every effort to save these species, not least because they are worth infinitely more alive as tourist attractions than dead,” said Carlos Drews, WWF’s regional coordinator for marine turtle conservation in Latin America and the Caribbean. “The good news from the Dominican Republic is that it shows to fellow nations that a real difference can be made to reduce illegal trade.”

NOTES to editors:

- The market surveys undertaken in February were carried out under the co-operation framework of the Central American-Dominican Republic-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR).
- There are an estimated 8,000 nesting female hawksbill turtles (source:panda.org) that inhabit the coastal waters of a 180 countries around the world. The survival of the species is threatened by illegal tortoiseshell trade, egg collection, slaughter for meat and recently, climate change

TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, works to ensure that trade in wild plants and animals is not a threat to the conservation of nature. TRAFFIC is a joint programme of IUCN, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and WWF, the global conservation organization.

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations, with almost 5 million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption. Learn more at panda.org.