



BOATING IMPACTS



Turtles and boats

All sea turtles are reptiles. They spend almost their entire lives swimming in the ocean. The only time they are not in the ocean is when the eggs are developing in the sand on the beach (they leave land after hatching) and when the females return to shore to lay eggs. All sea turtles breathe air and need to come to land to lay eggs. They are cold blooded like all other reptiles, which is why they are found in warm ocean waters. All the hard-shelled turtles have a body temperature that is the same as the water in which they live. The leatherback is the only soft-shelled sea turtle and is the only turtle that is found in colder waters. Because its body is so big and because it has special counter current heat exchangers in its flippers, it can maintain a body temperature higher than the surrounding water.

Four species of sea turtles are found in the U.S.V.I., the hawksbill, green, loggerhead and leatherback. Hawksbills are the smallest; they have a hawk-like beak, and their shell is elongated and slightly tear dropped in shape. The green turtle's shell is rounder and the shape of its nose is much blunter. Loggerheads are uncommon in the Territory, but several have recently been seen. They are reddish in color and have a much thicker neck and head than the hawksbill and green turtles. The loggerhead eats a

wide range of food items primarily molluscs, crustaceans and fish. However, other marine animals and plants have also been found in the guts of stranded loggerhead turtles.

Hawksbills are generally found near reefs where they eat primarily sponges. Sponges are a difficult meal. They are often filled with silicious spicules (literally spines made of glass) and contain toxins.

Green turtles have an herbivorous diet comprised of seagrasses and algae. They are usually found near productive seas grass beds or algal meadows.

Leatherbacks are the largest of the turtles and are unique in that they have seven ridges that extend the length of their body. The "shell" is not hard like the other turtles but is made up of a thick fatty fibrous tissue. Most evidence indicates that leatherback turtles feed almost exclusively on gelatinous organisms (especially jellyfish). The specialized structures in their mouths and throats appear to help leatherbacks capture/retain soft-bodied prey. Leatherbacks are very infrequently seen, except when they approach the shore to nest.

A disturbing trend is beginning at the largest leatherback nesting beach in the USA, which is located at Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge, St. Croix. There has been an increase in boat traffic close to shore during the 6 to 7 day period surrounding the

full moon phase during the summer nesting season. During the 2005 nesting season surveys at Sandy Point, 15 leatherbacks had injuries attributed to boat propeller damage. Eight were fresh wounds, which may have occurred as the turtles were coming to shore to nest at Sandy Point. These injuries coincided with nights that near shore boat traffic was documented.

A number of green turtles have also been struck by boats and died in and around Christiansted Harbor. These turtles were struck in areas that swimmers frequent. Boaters need to be aware of their immediate surroundings and take measures to avoid running into swimming people or turtles.

Remember that boats may only be operated at speed within operational areas (Title 25(15:297), VIRR). These are areas outside the USVI safety zones. Safety zones are defined as areas shoreward of the following boundaries:

- St. Thomas and St. John: an area seaward 200 feet of any fringing reef, but in no case less than 500 feet from the shoreline (including offshore cays and islands);
- St. Croix: an area seaward 200 feet of any fringing reef, but in no case less than 400 feet from the shoreline (including offshore cays and islands).

The safety zones also include an area 500 feet from any designated non-motorized recreational watersports activity area, such as designated swimming, snorkeling, diving, surfing and sailboarding (windsurfing) areas.

If you are boating within these safety zones, increase your vigilance to avoid swimmers, sea turtles, manatees, sea grasses and corals. You must reduce your speed to reduce your wake.

Many bays and harbors in the USVI are designated **Restricted Areas, Prohibited Areas, and Closed Areas** (Please call the local Division of Environmental Enforcement STT 340-774-3320, STX 340-773-5774, or refer to the “Handbook of Virgin Islands Boating Laws and Responsibilities” for more information).

In **Restricted Areas**, operation of motorized watercraft entering or leaving a restricted area shall be in as straight a line as practicable and without excessive wake and at a reduced speed.

Prohibited Areas are designated as non-motorized (except for fishing and diving activities) recreational watersports activity areas when surfing or windsurfing activities are being conducted. No motorized vessels (except fishing and diving vessels)

may enter the area while these watersports are being conducted.

Closed Areas are those in which all motorized vessels are prohibited. These are also areas of high environmental value.

The National Marine Fisheries Service has designated the waters surrounding Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge as Critical Habitat for the Territory’s Sea Turtles. It is very important that boaters reduce their speed in this area because prior to emerging from the water, the female turtle will come within 30 to 100 feet of the beach and “poke” her head up to see the beach profile. Once she has found the right “spot”, she will approach the beach to emerge from the water to begin her nesting activity. During this time the turtles remain near the surface and are very susceptible to injury from speeding boats.

What you can do to help

1. Follow the safe boating guidelines described in this brochure and the Handbook of VI Boating Laws.
2. During the leatherback nesting season (generally April through August) reduce your speed, especially at night while you are traveling through the designated critical habitat, or close to any sandy beach.
3. During the nesting seasons, for green and hawksbill turtles, fall/winter, reduce your speed and move away from the coast line to prevent hitting nesting turtles.
4. If you see someone harassing a sea turtle or poaching a nest, call the local police (911) or the local Division of Environmental Enforcement STT 340-774-3320, STX 340-773-5774.
5. For more information on sea turtles in the Virgin Islands please visit our web site at:

www.vifishandwildlife.com

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