

## USVI's

**Tourists and turtles:  
how you can help**

Sea turtles are protected by law in the Virgin Islands. We all have a role to play to help keep our sea turtle population safe. If you encounter a turtle during your visit to the islands, there are several important tips to keep in mind:

Observe the turtle from a safe distance of approximately 6-10 feet

- Be aware of any turtles or nests while on the beach during the day and night
- Do not touch the sea turtles
- Be sure to adhere to the law in the USVI by wearing reef-safe sunscreen or UV protective clothing
- Help keep beaches clean by properly disposing of all trash on the beach and near the water. Remove beach gear such as chairs and umbrellas after use
- While boating, be on the lookout for any turtles nearby
- Reduce and reuse plastics
- If you see a turtle in need of help, you can call the Sea Turtle Assistance and Rescue Team at 340-690-0474
- Consider volunteering and supporting the organizations listed in this article

# treasured turtles

By Jesse Daley

**Some of the most memorable experiences you'll have while visiting the U.S. Virgin Islands will undoubtedly involve experiencing the wildlife that call the islands home—including the various species of sea turtles that live and nest in the territory.**

Whether you're visiting St. Thomas, St. John, or St. Croix, you'll have the opportunity to witness sea turtles in their natural habitat. It's important to learn about these majestic creatures and how to help protect them during your stay.

Photo by Friends of VINP

## Species of turtles in the USVI

Out of the seven species of sea turtles on earth, there are three that will regularly visit and lay eggs in the Virgin Islands. According to the USVI Division of Fish and Wildlife, the species that come to the territory are:

**The hawksbill sea turtle**—a smaller-sized turtle with a unique hawk-like shaped mouth

**The leatherback sea turtle**—a very large turtle that can weigh more than 1,300 pounds and grow to nearly 6 feet in length

**The green sea turtle**—a medium-sized turtle that may vary in color from green to brown

A fourth species, **the loggerhead turtle**, has also been seen in the waters of the U.S. Virgin Islands, but it is very uncommon. The main three species of sea turtles tend to prefer to visit certain islands based on their unique needs for nesting.

## How we protect them

Many projects on each of the USVI's three principal islands help protect sea turtles and their nests. Turtle rehabilitation programs provide care for turtles that are injured or require medical attention.

## St. John

Hawksbill and green sea turtles are the main species found on St. John, where the Virgin Islands National Park Sea Turtle Monitoring and Protection Program, run by the Friends of VINP, collects data and protects these gentle animals.

"If you snorkel in the waters of St. John, you'll likely encounter a green sea turtle," says Friends Turtle Program coordinator Willow Melamet. "That species is very commonly seen foraging on the seagrass beds but generally doesn't nest on St. John. The hawksbill turtles are the most common nesters on St. John, and the leatherback is usually passing through the waters."

## St. Thomas

On St. Thomas, hawksbill turtles are the main nesters, capable of crawling on the island's rocky shores. The occasional leatherback will nest on the softer sand beaches on St. Thomas as well. As on St. John, the green sea turtle can also be seen in the waters surrounding the island.

Multiple turtle protection efforts are in place, including nonprofit organizations Sea Turtle Assistance and Rescue and Coral World Ocean and Reef Initiative. There's also ongoing turtle research conducted at the University of the Virgin Islands.

"STAR handles response and distress, and the rehabilitation transfers over to CWORI," says Coral World veterinary technician Erica Palmer. "The ultimate goal—and part of why CWORI came into effect—is that we would like to build a true hospital. We're using fairly dated facilities. We have basic facilities, but having an actual hospital is the goal

within CWORI. If we have more pools available, we can have more turtles at one time and have one location rather than different areas."

Like St. John, St. Thomas has a program that documents nests and hatching success.

"The St. Thomas Nest Monitoring Program gives this information to the Department of Planning and Natural Resources Division of Fish and Wildlife, which can further use this data to make decisions on beach management and projects," says Katie Ayres, a University of the Virgin Islands graduate student who's studying hawksbill turtles. "The nest monitoring program is also acting as an education and outreach program. We reach multiple people just by walking on the beach and documenting these nests. During our volunteer training, we can help inform the public that turtles are nesting in the USVI, and how they can help protect these turtles by their everyday actions."



Hawksbill sea turtle

Photo by Friends of VINP



Green sea turtle

Photo by Friends of VINP

## St. Croix

Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge plays a significant role in the nesting of sea turtles on the biggest of the three main Virgin Islands. And while green and hawksbill turtles nest here, St. Croix is also a favorite nesting spot for the enormous leatherback sea turtle, the largest living turtle on earth.

These massive creatures with a leathery-type shell choose to nest at Sandy Point because of the area's conditions, including miles of soft sandy beaches. The wildlife refuge is closed from April through August, specifically to allow for sea turtle nesting to occur.

The St. Croix Sea Turtle Project, which is affiliated with the Fish and Wildlife Service on the island, is a conservation and research organization that operates at Sandy Point with the goal of protecting and researching the turtles, with a focus on leatherbacks.



Coral World's Erica Palmer and Sydney Adams assist an injured turtle.

## Turtle trivia: did you know?

Do you know your turtle trivia? Here are a few fascinating facts about these amazing animals.

"Sea turtles and tortoises do not have a skeleton inside their bodies; the body is the skeleton. Because the skeleton is actually attached to the shell, sea turtles cannot pull inside their shells."

Erica Palmer, Coral World vet tech

"Sea turtles can make more than one nest in a nesting season, and depending on the species, they may be laying anywhere between 80 and 180 eggs in each nest."

Katie Ayres, UVI graduate student

Turtles dig their nests by using their flippers to push away sand and then dig down to create spaces for eggs. This process can take several hours to complete.

Green sea turtles are so named because of the green color of the fat on their bodies. The green hue is caused by the vegetation in their diet, composed mostly of seagrass and algae. Hawksbill turtles derive their name from their beak-shaped mouths, and leatherback turtles are distinguished by their leathery-type shell, rather than a hard shell.

"Hawksbill turtles usually return to the beach that they hatched from, which is pretty amazing. These turtles will migrate as hatchlings away from St. John, be gone for up to 30 years, and then return to the beaches of St. John. Only one in 1,000 hatchlings makes it to maturity; it could even be closer to one in 5,000."

Willow Melamet, Friends of VINP Turtle Program coordinator