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# BASIC FACTS ABOUT SEA TURTLES

Sea turtles are one of the Earth's most ancient creatures. The seven species that can be found today have been around for 110 million years, since the time of the dinosaurs. The sea turtle's shell or "carapace" is streamlined for swimming through the water. Unlike other turtles, sea turtles cannot retract their legs and head into their shells. Their color varies between yellow, greenish and black depending on the species.

## Diet

What sea turtles eat depends on the subspecies, but some common items include jellyfish, seaweed, crabs, shrimp, sponges, snails, algae and mollusks.

## Population

It is difficult to find population numbers for sea turtles because male and juvenile sea turtles do not return to shore once they hatch and reach the ocean, which makes it hard to keep track of them.

## Range

Sea turtles are found in all warm and temperate waters throughout the world and migrate hundreds of miles between nesting and feeding grounds. Most sea turtles undergo long migrations, some as far as 1400 miles, between their feeding grounds and the beaches where they nest.

## Behavior

Sea turtles spend most of their lives in the water, where not much information can be gathered on their behavior. Most of what is known about sea turtle behavior is obtained by observing hatchlings and females that leave the water to lay eggs. Sea turtles, like salmon, will return to the same nesting grounds at which they were born. When females come to the shore they dig out a nest in the ground with their back flippers, bury their clutch of eggs and return to the ocean. After hatching, the young may take as long as a week to dig themselves out of the nest. They emerge at night, move toward the ocean and remain there, solitary, until it is time to mate.

## Reproduction

**Temperature:**Temperatures of the sand where the turtles nest determine the sex of the turtle: below 85 degrees Fahrenheit (30ºC) is predominately male; above 85 degrees Fahrenheit (30ºC) is predominately female.  
**Mating Season:** FromMarch-October depending on the species.  
**Gestation:** 6-10 weeks.  
**Clutch size:** Between 70-190 eggs depending on the species.  
When the young hatch out of their eggs, they make their way to the ocean. Few survive to adulthood.

# THREATS

About 1 in 1,000 baby sea turtles will make it to adulthood. They are a source of food for crabs, birds, and other marine animals. However, the biggest threats to sea turtles by far are human related. Oil spills, habitat loss due to development, and entanglement in marine debris such as plastic bags are threats that face many marine animals, but others specifically affect turtles.

For example, when sea turtle eggs are incubating, the surrounding temperature affects the sex of the hatchlings, with higher temperatures producing more females. As sand becomes warmer due to climate change, the ratio of females to males becomes out of balance, affecting breeding activities when they reach adulthood. Also, the artificial lighting coming from beachside communities confuses turtles that normally follow the moon and stars’ reflection off the waves to make it back to water, making them more vulnerable to predators, dehydration and road kill. In some countries, turtle shells are traded on the black market and turtles and their eggs are harvested for food.

## Sea Turtle Habitat and Distribution

Sea turtles are known to be distributed in many places around the world, except the Polar Regions. They prefer the tropic and sub tropics temperatures. They are found along the coastal regions of sandy beaches. This includes areas of North America, South America, Central America, India, South Africa, and Australia. They have also been spotted in the Atlantic Ocean by Canada and even in areas around Europe.

Occasionally, sea turtles will be found in strange locations. Researchers wonder if they got confused during migration. Perhaps they were in fishing net and turned loose far from their natural habitat. Others believe it has to do with global warming and the search for food. Since sea turtles are loners these are often isolated incidents were one or two sea turtles are identified.

Some sea turtles are known to live in the colder waters, but it is often due to necessity. For example when they can’t find enough food to survive on in their natural habitat they may venture further than they did in the past to locate it. You will also find that sea turtles travel through the colder waters when they migrate.

***Did You Know?***

*Green sea turtles can stay under water for as long as five hours even though the length of a feeding dive is usually five minutes or less. Their heart rate slows to conserve oxygen: nine minutes may elapse between heartbeats.*

The migration process for sea turtles is very fascinating. They can travel several miles for mating. They will return to the sandy beach where they were hatched to deposit their own eggs. It doesn’t matter how long that journey is from their current location. The problem though is that if they return to that habitat to lay their eggs and it has been destroyed by humans, they simply won’t be laying any eggs. That means the population of sea turtles is going to be adversely affected.

When they aren’t migrating, sea turtles are content to live in a given location. They will travel around a certain area looking for food. The home area of a sea turtle will commonly overlap with that of many others. While they are loners so they don’t group together, they don’t seem to mind sharing the territory with other sea turtles.

Where you will find the sea turtles in the water really depends on their age. For example the adult sea turtles are commonly found in shallow waters including bays and lagoons. They can also be found in the open sea as many of the species can dive deep down into the water to find food.

It is believed that the younglings are to stay in areas of the coral reef for a at least the first year of life. Very little is known about them during this period of time and researchers still aren’t 100% positive that is where they reside. It is like these newly hatched sea turtles simply disappear without a trace for at least a year and then they move closer to the shoreline.

## What do Sea Turtles Eat?

There is quite a bit of difference when it comes to the feeding habits of sea turtles. Some of them will only consume meat while others consume plants. There are a few species where they start off consuming meat when they are young. However, as they mature they change to a diet of only plants. This is why you will notice such a different in the overall jaw structure of the various types of sea turtles.

Green Sea Turtles have jaws that are serrated. The young start out being carnivores but as adults they only consume plant life. When you look at the jaws of both Loggerheads and the two Ridley’s species, you will notice that they are very powerful. This allows them to be able to crush as well as to grind up the meat that they consume from various types of aquatic life.

The Hawksbill Sea Turtle has a beak like structure to their jaws. This is because they need a pointy object that allows them to remove food from crevices in the coral reefs. That is where their foods sources of sponges, squid, and shrimp are found. Leatherback Sea Turtles can only consume very soft foods such as jellyfish due to the design of their jaws. They are very similar to a pair of scissors.

## Sea Turtle Breeding and Reproduction

The reproduction process of sea turtles is important as it is what keeps the various species alive. The age for maturity significantly varies from one species to the next. For some, it is when they are 3-5 years of age. For others though it is as late as 20-50 years of age. It will depend on the type of sea turtle species you are talking about.

The mating process takes place in the water so there isn’t too much known about it. This has been confirmed due to the fact that the males don’t make their way to the shore. They always remain in the water for most of the sea turtle species. It is believed the courting process can take place for several weeks before mating occurs. The males may compete with each other by seeing who can raise their neck the highest.

It is common for there to be more males than females, so she gets her pick of who she wants to mate with. It isn’t uncommon for the males and females to travel hundreds of miles to where they will mate and then the females will lay their eggs. Older females may have marks on their backs from the mating process. It is believed the males use the claws on their front flippers to hold onto the female while mating[[1]](#footnote-1) is taking place.

The mother never goes back to check on her eggs or to associate with the young. Many of them die because they can’t get out of the shell. Others become lunch for birds or other predators in the area. Even in the water these younglings become food for many forms of aquatic life. There is also the human element which is to collect the sea turtle eggs for food instead of letting them hatch. It is estimated that only 10% of the hatchlings will survive to adulthood.

## Sea Turtles In Decline

Having graced the oceans for more than 100 million years, sea turtles represent some of the most ancient species on Earth. As history tells it, sea turtles were once so abundant that sailors could step out of their boats and amble from sea to shore by using their shells as stepping stones. Today, the scene is much different. All around the world, humans have driven sea turtle populations to the brink of extinction. Unintended catch, or “bycatch,” of sea turtles in commercial fisheries, poaching of sea turtles and their eggs, coastal development, trade of sea turtles and their parts and poor enforcement of conservation laws all have contributed to the worldwide decline of their populations.

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| Species | Population Status Under Endangered Species Act |
| Green | Endangered (Florida & Mexico’s Pacific Coast)  Threatened (all other areas) |
| Hawksbill | Endangered |
| Kemp’s Ridley | Endangered |
| Leatherback | Endangered |
| Loggerhead | Threatened |
| Olive Ridley | Endangered (Mexico’s Pacific Coast)  Threatened (all other areas) |
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## Glossary

**Arribada** - Spanish for Arrival, used to refer to a mass, synchronized nesting of sea turtles.

**Carapace** - The top portion of the turtle shell.

**Crustaceans** - Lobsters, shrimp, and crabs that have hard shells, jointed legs, and live underwater.

**Endangered** - When a species is in danger of becoming extinct.

**Estuary** - A place where fresh water and salt water meet, where a river flows into the sea.

**Extinct** - When the last living member of that species dies and that type of animal is gone forever.

**False** **Crawl** - When a mother turtle comes up on the beach but doesn’t make a nest.

**Green** **Turtle** - An endangered sea turtle named for the green body fat under its shell.

**Hatchling** - Baby turtles that have just come out of their shells.

**Hawksbill** **Turtle** - An endangered sea turtle with a hook shaped beak, killed for its shell.

**Kemp’s** **Ridley** **Turtle** - The smallest and rarest of the endangered sea turtles.

**Leatherback** **Turtle** - The largest of the endangered sea turtles. It gets its name from the leathery covering on its carapace.

**Loggerhead** **Turtle** - A threatened sea turtle, name for the shape of its head.

**Migration** - Traveling from one area to another, sometimes for food or to mate.

**Olive** **Ridley** **Turtle** - A small sea turtle named for the olive green color of its heart shaped shell.

**Plastron** - The bottom of the turtle shell.

**Poachers** - Humans that hunt animals illegally. Laws in the U.S. protect endangered and threatened animals from being hunted or killed.

**Predators** - Animals that hunt and eat other animals for food.

**Sea** **Grass** - Grass that grows under water, usually in a large area called a bed, a good source of food and habitat for many types of sea life.

**Scutes** - The scales that cover a turtle shell.

**Threatened** - At risk for becoming endangered, and possibly headed towards extinction.

# Bibliography

Brad. (2016, February). *SEETurtles*. Retrieved March 01 Tuesday, 2016, from SEETurtles.org: www.SEEturtles.org

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| Sea Turtle Species | |
| **Species Name** | **Image** |
| Green Sea Turtle The Green Sea Turtle is a fairly large species with a length of about five and a half feet and weighing up to 400 pounds. | Green Sea turtle facts |
| Loggerhead Sea Turtle The Loggerhead Sea Turtle has a head that is much bigger than any others out there. The overall body is shaped very similar to a heart. | Figure 2: Loggerhead Sea Turtle |
| Kemps Ridley Sea Turtle The Kemps Ridley Sea Turtle is one of the smallest out there in the world. They weigh only about 100 pounds and they are from 2 and half feet long to 3 feet long. | Figure 3: Kemps Ridley Sea Turtle |
| Flatback Sea Turtle  As the name implies, the Flatback Sea Turtle has a shell that is very flat on the top. | Figure 4: Flatback Sea Turtle |
| Leatherback Sea Turtle The Leatherback Turtle is the largest of all species that live in the water. | Figure 5: Leatherback Sea Turtle |
| Olive Ridley Sea Turtle Featuring a gray and green coloring as well as a heart shaped shell, the Olive Ridley Sea Turtle is one many people are familiar with. | Figure 6: Olive Ridley Sea Turtle |
| Hawksbill Sea Turtle  You will first notice that the Hawkbill Sea Turtle features a heart shaped shell on its body. | Figure 7: Hawksbill Sea Turtle |

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1. Reproduction [↑](#footnote-ref-1)