



# Sea Turtles

## *Global Species at Risk*

Sea turtles are among the world's most imperiled wildlife. Once abundant populations in the Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans have dwindled due to human exploitation and human-caused degradation of their habitat. Despite several decades of conservation efforts, these species, whose ancestors date back over 100 million years, remain at risk.

### Basic Biology

- Sea turtles are among the world's largest reptiles. The smallest species (the Kemp's ridley) reaches 2 to 2½ feet in length and weighs 80 to 100 pounds. The largest – the leatherback – can be 4 to 8 feet in length and weigh 700 to 2,000 pounds.
- Sea turtles have scales and a bony shell; they are cold-blooded and breathe air. Most species are carnivores or omnivores; they use their powerful jaws to tear and crush food.
- Sea turtles have long life spans. They require many years to reach sexual maturity (10 to 40 years depending on the species) and may live as long as 50 to 80 years.
- Sea turtles spend almost their entire lives in the sea. Their flipper-like forelimbs and streamlined shells allow them to glide gracefully through the water. They come to the surface often to breathe when active, but can remain underwater for several hours while resting.
- Sea turtles inhabit all of the world's oceans except the Arctic; most live in warm tropical and subtropical waters. Leatherbacks, however, travel as far north as Canada and as far south as the Cape of Good Hope in Africa.

- Female sea turtles come ashore to lay their eggs. They cover them with sand before returning to the water. The hatchlings that emerge make their way up through the sand and then scurry to the water.
- Sea turtles are highly migratory; they travel long distances and routinely traverse the waters of more than one country over their lifetimes. Sea turtles thus represent a natural treasure shared among many nations.
- Six of the world's seven sea turtle species (all but the flatback turtle) can be found in U.S. and Mexican waters.

### Protected Status

- All seven sea turtle species are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) – a global agreement through which the United States and more than 170 other nations work together to safeguard animal and plant resources from unsustainable trade.
- Animal and plant species are listed on three different “appendices” under CITES and receive different levels of protection depending on the viability of wild populations.
- Sea turtles are listed on Appendix I of the treaty, meaning that commercial trade is generally prohibited.
- Six sea turtle species are listed as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA).
- The hawksbill, Kemp's ridley, and leatherback sea turtles are considered endangered throughout

their ranges. Endangered means that a species is considered at risk of extinction.

- The loggerhead sea turtle is listed as threatened (meaning that it is likely to become endangered).
- Specific populations of two other species – the green sea turtle and the olive ridley sea turtle – are listed as endangered, with all other populations considered threatened.
- Under the ESA, it is generally illegal to kill a listed species or to import, export, or sell it in interstate commerce.
- A seventh species – the flatback sea turtle, which is native to Australian waters – is not listed under the ESA, but is protected under the CITES treaty.
- Many countries around the world – including Mexico – also have laws that protect sea turtles from harvest and commercial use.

### Illegal Take and Trade

- Human use of sea turtles has played a major role in the decline of sea turtle populations.
- Hawksbills, for example, are particularly prized for their shell, which is fashioned into products that include combs, brushes, eyeglass frames, jewelry, musical instrument picks, instrument bow parts, and furniture inlay.
- Olive ridleys and other species have been exploited in the exotic skin trade, where they are used to make boots, belts, and other leather goods.
- Sea turtles are caught and killed for their meat. Conservationists

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estimate that some 35,000 sea turtles are consumed annually in California and Baja California.

- The collection and sale of sea turtle eggs – which are valued in some Latin American and Caribbean countries as an aphrodisiac – also remains a concern.
- While commercial trade in sea turtle products is banned under the CITES treaty, markets still exist throughout the world for sea turtle parts, products, eggs, and meat. The United States is no exception.
- Hawksbill shell pieces (called scutes) can fetch more than \$500 per kilogram (about 2.2 pounds) in this country, while unworked sea turtle skin pieces sell on the black market for up to \$80 a piece.
- Finished products include luxury goods such as sea turtle boots, which can be priced as high as \$500 a pair.

#### **Other Threats to Sea Turtles**

- Coastal residential and resort development affects sea turtle nesting habitat or disrupts nesting behavior. Prime sea turtle nesting sites have become prime real estate.

- Artificial lighting in beachfront communities disorients nesting females and hatchlings, causing them to head inland by mistake.
- Vehicles driven on the beach deter turtles from nesting, crush them, or leave tire tracks deep enough to force hatchlings to detour and possibly die en route to the ocean.
- Sea turtles drown in the nets of fishing fleets or are caught on the hooks of longliners. Before the use of turtle exclusionary devices, tens of thousands were killed each year in the nets of the U.S. shrimp fleet alone.
- Sea turtles become entangled in marine debris or are struck and killed by ships, small boats, and jet skis when they come to the surface to breathe.

#### **More Information**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (specifically, NOAA-Fisheries) share responsibility under the ESA for restoring sea turtle populations and protecting sea turtle species. Federal activities include recovery efforts for U.S. populations; support to conservation

programs in other countries; and enforcement of laws and treaties that protect sea turtles from commercial exploitation and illegal trade.

The following websites provide additional background information about U.S. efforts to conserve sea turtles:

<http://www.fws.gov/northflorida/SeaTurtles/seaturtle-info.htm>

<http://www.fws.gov/international/animals/marineturtleprogram.htm>

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/>

<http://www.noaa.gov/turtles.html>

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Office of Law Enforcement  
4401 N. Fairfax Drive, MS-LE-3000  
Arlington, VA 22203  
Phone: (703) 358-1949  
<http://www.fws.gov>**

September 2007