

Tremendous Turtles Fact File

Turtle facts



There are seven species of sea turtle in our ocean.



Sea turtles spend most of their lives at sea, but have lungs so they need to surface regularly to breathe.



The earliest sea turtle fossil is roughly 110 million years old.



Their oar-like flippers allow them to swim swiftly through the ocean, and they have beak-like jaws rather than teeth.



The technical name for their shell is carapace.



Most sea turtles are cold-blooded and thrive in warmer climates, but the leatherback can control its own body temperature, enabling it to visit colder temperate seas to feed on its favourite food: jellyfish.



Research on seagrass beds has shown that those beds that have been grazed on by green turtles are more productive.



Many sea turtles eat jellyfish, which may help to prevent jellyfish blooms.

Lifecycle

Turtles lay their eggs in nests on beaches, which they dig out with their flippers. Females don't stay to incubate eggs or raise young, but they do return to the same beach each nesting season.

The temperature of the sand in the nest determines the sex of the turtle. Higher temperatures produce female turtles, and lower temperatures produce male turtles. Eggs hatch after about 2 months, when the turtles dig their way out of the sand and head to the sea. Unfortunately, many hatchlings are preyed upon by birds, fish and sharks.

Turtles are slow-growing and can live for a very long time. Some species take 20–30 years to reach maturity.

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Seven species



© Alastair Rae

Leatherback turtle

The largest turtle, usually around 2 metres long. They get their name from the black, leathery skin covering their carapace. They're the most common turtle species in the UK.

Useful definitions:

Carapace – the hard upper shell of a turtle, tortoise, crustacean, or arachnid.

Jellyfish bloom – a substantial increase in a jellyfish population within a short space of time.



© MCS/Jonathan Kincaid

Hawksbill turtle

Hawksbill turtles have been hunted for their beautiful shells, and are now critically endangered. Their narrow head and long, tapered beak like a bird of prey, give them their name.



© MCS/Tim Fanshawe

Loggerhead turtle

Loggerhead turtles are named after their very large heads! They have powerful jaw muscles and a large beak for crushing prey like crabs.



© NOAA/David Burdick

Green turtle

Green turtles were once hunted for turtle soup, and their name comes from a green fat which is the main ingredient in the soup. Adult green turtles feed on seagrass and algae.



© USFWS Endangered Species

Kemp's ridley turtle

Kemp's ridley turtles are the rarest marine turtle. They were nearly extinct in the 1980s, but through conservation efforts, their numbers are increasing.



© Joost van Uffelen

Olive ridley turtle

Olive ridley turtles have an olive green carapace. Thousands of females come to shore at the same time to nest simultaneously.



© EA Given

Flatback turtle

Flatback turtles, as the name suggests, have a flattened carapace. They are only found in Australia and New Guinea.

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Turtles in trouble

All 7 species of turtle are included on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species and some populations are at risk of becoming extinct.

Entanglement in fishing gear

All species of turtle are susceptible to accidental capture in fishing gear, a phenomenon known as bycatch. They could be entangled in nets during fishing or discarded net, for example. Longline fishing methods are particularly impactful, and in the year 2000 alone over 200,000 loggerhead turtles were caught as longline bycatch. (1)



Green turtle entangled in fishing net © Mohamed Abdurraheem via Shutterstock

Use of turtle eggs, meat and shells

Marine turtles are still legally harvested for their meat in four of the five UK Overseas Territories in the Caribbean. Extensive turtle egg collection is thought to have been a significant factor in the decline of several marine turtle populations around the world. We've been working with communities in the Caribbean to ensure there's a maximum size limit on any turtles fished for meat. The aim is to protect turtles over a certain shell length so that they're able to mature and reproduce, which will support population maintenance.

In many parts of the world, hawksbill turtles are targeted for the scales on their shells, which are used to make 'tortoiseshell' decorations and jewellery.



Turtle hatchlings © Jolo Diaz via Pexels

1. Lewison et al 2004

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Turtles in trouble

Habitat disturbance

Turtle nesting beaches are under pressure from development, especially from the tourism industry. Light pollution also disorients emerging hatchlings, making them head inland to artificial light sources rather than out to sea. Boat traffic can also damage seagrass beds and coral reefs, which are important turtle feeding habitats.



Beach tourism
© Michaela via Unsplash

Pollution

Chemical pollution like oil spills and sewage can directly affect marine turtles if they're exposed to high levels. It can also lead to contamination of their feeding habitats and nesting beaches. Turtles are also killed by entanglement in, and ingestion of, marine litter, like discarded fishing gear, plastic bags and balloons.



Oil washing up on the beach
© Doug Helton/NOAA via Flickr

Climate change

Turtle nesting beaches could be inundated with water due to sea level rise if they're prevented from moving inland as a result of coastal development. Foraging habitats like tropical coral reefs and seagrass beds are likely to be affected by rising sea temperatures, rising sea levels, ocean acidification and the effects of increased storms and rainfall. Rising temperatures will also affect the sex ratios of turtles. Higher nest temperatures produce female turtles and lower temperatures produce male turtles. Due to warming temperatures, some beaches are now producing 99% female hatchlings. (2)



Researcher studying bleached corals ©
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