



EDUCATION

Sea turtles are large air-breathing reptiles remarkably adapted to life in the sea. They live in all but the coldest of the world's oceans, but nest only on tropical and subtropical beaches where it is warm enough to incubate their eggs. All sea turtles are protected by federal and state laws.

Sea turtles have a low streamline shell and powerful, oversized front limbs, adaptations that enable them to swim for great distances. They have no teeth but use their jaws to crush and tear food. The smallest sea turtle, the Kemp's Ridley, weighs about 75 to 100 pounds when mature, while adults of the largest species, the leatherback, can weigh almost 1,300 pounds and may be eight feet in length.



photo by Doug Perrine

Sea turtles spend most of their day feeding or sleeping under reef ledges or in the open ocean. Some travel hundreds or thousands of miles to feed or nest. Females lay their eggs on sandy beaches and are slow and awkward on land. A female will usually lay several nests during one season and may nest every two to three years.

The difficult process of nesting takes up to three hours. A turtle must drag her great weight ashore, dig a nest with her back flippers, deposit about one hundred eggs, and cover and conceal the nest before returning to sea. The eggs incubate in the warm sand and the female never visits her nest again.

After incubating for about two months, the two-inch long turtles hatch, erupt as a group from their nest in the cool of the night, and scurry down the beach to the sea. Many hatchlings swim offshore to live for several years in floating seaweed drifting along the edges of ocean currents.



photo by Doug Perrine

Eventually the young turtles take up residence in coastal waters. Many years pass before the few hatchlings that survive reach maturity. A sea turtle may live for 40 to 60 years or more.

Sea turtles once roamed the oceans by the millions, but over the past few centuries the demand for sea turtle meat, eggs, shell, leather and oil has greatly reduced their numbers.

Populations continue to decline as habitat is lost and the trade in sea turtle products continues. Every year, thousands of sea turtles drown in shrimp trawls and other fishing gear and others die from pollutants or from swallowing trash mistaken for food.

Many hatchling sea turtles are disoriented by bright lights from the ocean to be crushed by cars or stranded. Conservationists and people around the world are working to protect them.



CLASSIFICATION OF SEA TURTLES

The following classification has been taken from the booklet and brochure "Florida's Sea Turtles, © 1983, Florida Power & Light Company



Hawksbill Turtle

The endangered hawksbill, a relatively small turtle, has been hunted to the brink of extinction for its beautiful shell. Once fairly common in Florida, these turtles now nest here only rarely. Hawksbills feed on sponges and other invertebrates and tend to nest on small isolated beaches.



Kemp's Ridley

The rarest and smallest of all the sea turtles, the endangered Kemp's Ridley feeds in the coastal waters of Florida on blue crabs and other crabs and shrimp. All Kemp's Ridleys nest on a single stretch of beach on the Gulf Coast of Mexico.



Loggerhead Turtle

The loggerhead turtle is the most common sea turtle in Florida. It is listed as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act. Named for its large head, which can be ten inches wide, it has powerful jaws to crush the heavy-shelled clams, crabs and encrusting animals on which it feeds. In the past few years, 49,000 to 68,000 loggerhead nests have been recorded in Florida annually.



Green Turtle

The green turtle, named for the greenish color of its body fat, is listed as endangered in Florida. Most green turtles nest in the Caribbean but 500 to 2000 nests are recorded in Florida each year. Green turtles have been hunted for centuries for their meat and gelatinous "calipee" that is made into soup. Hunting and egg gathering have reduced their number greatly. Green turtles are the only sea turtles that eat plants. They graze on the vast beds of seagrasses found throughout the tropics. Some populations travel over a thousand miles over open ocean to nest on islands in the mid-Atlantic.

Leatherback Turtle

The endangered leatherback turtle is the largest and most active of the sea



turtles. They travel thousands of miles, dive thousands of feet deep, and venture into more colder water than any other kind of sea turtle. Up to eight feet in length, these huge turtles have a rubbery dark shell marked by seven narrow ridges that extend the length of the back. Remarkably, leatherbacks feed on jellyfish and soft-bodied animals that would appear to provide very little nutrition for such huge animals. Ingestion of plastic bags and egg collecting are reasons for mortality and population declines. About 100 to 200 leatherback nests are recorded in Florida each year