

SPECIES

GREEN TURTLE – *CHELONIA MYDAS*

Green turtles are an endangered species around the world. They are easily recognized from other turtle species because they have a single pair of scales in front of their eyes. The largest green turtle ever found was 1,524m in length and weighed 395 kg's. The diet of the green turtle changes during its life. When less than 20 to 25 cm in length they eat worms, young crustaceans, aquatic insects, grasses and algae. When they reach more than 20 to 25 cm they mostly eat grasses and algae. The green turtle is the only sea turtle that is totally herbivorous as an adult. Their jaws are finely serrated to tear the vegetation. The green turtle is a non-breeding resident.

HAWKSBILL TURTLE – *ERETMOCHELYS IMBRICATA*

Occur as vagrants in our waters. The Hawksbill is a small to medium sized sea turtle. It has 4 pairs of scutes on the body, two claws on each flipper and a beak-like mouth. They feed on sponges, anemones, squid and shrimps from crevices in coral reefs. The carapace is heart shaped in very young turtles and becomes elongated with maturity. Hawksbills have been killed because of their beautiful shells which are used to make jewelry.

OLIVE RIDLEY – *LEPIDOCHELYS OLIVACEA*

The Olive Ridley is a small turtle and is olive green. Occurs as vagrants in our waters. They are omnivorous and feed on crabs and prawns.



LEATHERBACK TURTLES – *DERMOCHELYS CORIACEA*

Leatherback turtles grow the largest, dive the deepest and travel further than any of the other sea turtles. Mature leatherbacks weigh between 295 and 589 kg's. The largest leatherback ever recorded was almost 3m long and weighed 916kg. The leatherback does not have hard scales as other sea turtles do. It is named for its large, elongated shell – layers of thin tough rubbery skin. The body of the leatherback is barrel shaped, tapering at the rear to a blunt point. This streamlined body and power flippers allow the turtle to swim thousands of kilometers across the ocean. They have delicate scissor-like jaws, which is why they only eat soft-bodied animals. They slurp in jellyfish. Young leatherbacks can eat twice their weight in jellyfish. Females reach sexual maturity at approximately 12-15 years of age.

LOGGERHEAD TURTLE – *CARETTA CARETTA*

Loggerhead turtles get their name because of their exceptionally large heads. Adult loggerheads can weigh up to 159 kg's and have a reddish-brown carapace (upper shell) and a dull yellow plastron (lower shell). Loggerhead turtles are carnivorous and feed mainly on shellfish (crabs, clams, mussels) that live on the bottom of the ocean. Their powerful jaw muscles help them to easily crush the shellfish. Females reach sexual maturity at 12-15 years of age. Loggerheads lay an average of between 100 to 126 eggs per clutch.



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SEA TURTLES

What you want to know!



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GENERAL INFORMATION

OVERVIEW

5 species of sea turtles are found in South Africa.

Sea turtles are large air breathing REPTILES and have been around for over 2 million years. They live in the sea, but must rise to the surface to breathe air.

Their shells consist of an upper part (carapace) and a lower section (plastron). They have hard scales (scutes) that cover all over the carapace (except Leatherback turtles). The number of scutes determines the species of sea turtle.

Sea turtles do not have teeth. The jaw of each species is specially formed to suit their particular diet.

Each species of sea turtle eats, sleeps, mates and swims in distinctly different areas of the ocean. Therefore the turtles do not compete with each other for their food or space.

Sea turtles do not have visible ears, but they do have eardrums, which are covered by skin. They hear best at low frequencies and their sense of smell is excellent.

Turtles have salt glands that remove excess salt taken in with food. The salt solution drips out of their eyes and looks like tears.

REPRODUCTION

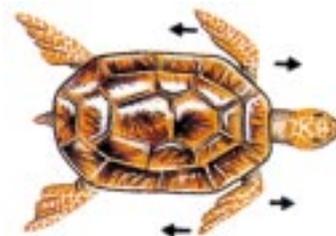
Breeding:

Most of the turtle's life is spent in the sea, but females must come onto the beaches to lay their eggs. All sea turtles begin their lives as tiny hatchlings on land. Along the South African coast lines nesting occurs between October and February.



Life cycle:

The eggs incubate for about 60 days, depending on the surrounding temperature. The temperature also has an effect on the sex of the juveniles. Cooler (20-24°C) clutches result in a male dominated clutch while warmer (29°C) nests produce females. Clutches laid between seasons produce both male and females. The hatchlings cut themselves out of the egg using a special egg tooth on the end of their beaks, and then slowly stretch their limbs. The hatchlings emerge after dark, when it is cooler and safe from predatory birds. They then move down to the water. During their scramble to the sea, ghost crabs eat many of the hatchlings. Once they are in the water they are very vulnerable to predators such as kingfish and sharks. It is estimated that only 1 or 2 hatchlings out of 1000 that enter the sea will survive to maturity. Turtles grow very slowly.



CONSERVATION

All turtle species are endangered. It is therefore essential that every effort be made to ensure the future survival of these creatures.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

Why are turtles endangered?

- Pollution
- Over exploitation of the adults and eggs
- Destruction and alteration of breeding beaches
- Gill nets

What can you do to help?

Litter should be disposed of properly. Turtles die each year as a result of eating plastic debris that they mistake for floating food. Plastic bags block the gut causing the slow starvation and death of turtles. Make sure that none of the items that you buy contain parts of turtle, in particular turtle shell jewelry and hair clips. In some parts of the world, turtles are harvested for food or their shells. Avoid driving vehicles on the beaches. Deep tyre tracks on soft sand can trap the turtle hatchlings.