

Green Sea Turtles



Green sea turtles are the second largest of the marine turtles after the Leatherback. They can weigh up to 500 lbs (225 kg) and reach four feet (1.2 m) in length. The adult is an herbivore, dining on sea grasses, seaweeds, algae and other forms of marine plant life. Their beak is sharp and finely serrated, perfectly adapted for grazing in seagrass beds and scraping algae off of hard surfaces. Greens are the only species of sea turtle that come on shore regularly to bask (shown below), which only occurs in Hawaii, the Galapagos Islands, and on a much smaller scale in some areas of Australia.

Facts:

- Their scientific name is *Chelonia mydas*
- These turtles are believed to improve the health of seagrass beds and associated microhabitats. They will graze the beds, taking off the tops of leaf blades, while avoiding the roots, having the same effect of mowing a lawn. The seagrass will grow healthier and faster with a daily trim!
- Green turtles inhabiting the Eastern Pacific are called Pacific Black turtles and some researchers believe they are a separate species. Their coloration is not black, but their skin pigmentation is slightly darker than the turtles of the Indian, Atlantic, and Western Pacific oceans, making them appear darker overall.
- Their name comes from the color of their fat, not their shell.
- They are listed as Endangered in the US and internationally by the IUCN Red List.



Distribution:

This species has a sub-tropical and tropical worldwide distribution, with major nesting assemblages in Tortuguero (Costa Rica), as well as Oman, Florida, and Raine Island (Australia) where thousands of turtles are reported to nest each night during peak nesting season. They are also found nesting on French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, Guam, American Samoa, Suriname, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands.



Major Threats:

Population declines are mainly due to harvest for eggs and meat for human consumption. Fibropapilloma (also known as FP) is a virus associated with lesions and rapid tumor growth on the eyes, mouth, and soft-skin areas, as well as internal organs. FP has greatly affected green turtle populations, especially in Florida and Hawaii, but also the Caribbean and Australia. This disease is most prevalent in green turtles, but has also been observed in other sea turtle species. Tumor growth can affect a turtle's ability to breath, eat, see, and swim, and may result in eventual debilitation and death. Other threats include ingestion of marine debris, boat strikes, beachfront lighting, and coastal development, feeding habitat degradation, pollution, and incidental capture in fishing gear.

Did You Know?

- These turtles nest in more than 80 countries around the world.
- Nearly all Hawaiian green sea turtles migrate to and nest at French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI), located approximately 500 miles NW of Honolulu. The NWHI are designated as a refuge and are restricted to scientific research only.
- There was once a turtle fishery off Key West, Florida until they were protected by law in the 1970's. At the time, their numbers were also greatly diminished in the Caribbean due to overharvesting. Today at the site of the former A. Granday Turtle Cannery, lies Turtle Kraals, a restaurant and bar, appropriately named after the Dutch African word "kraals" which means "corral". It was here that captured turtles were kept prior to being exported as a delicacy around the world.

Links & Resources:

Caribbean Conservation Corporation: Green Turtle Information
<http://www.ccturtle.org/seaturtleinformation.php?page=green>

IUCN Red List of Endangered Species: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/4615>

Green Turtle Migratory Route: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/01/090104094116.htm>



These materials are provided by SEE Turtles, a non-profit project that protects sea turtles through conservation travel. Visit our website, www.seeturtles.org for other fact sheets, school lesson plans, fundraising ideas, presentations, and field trips. Contact us at info@seeturtles.org for more information.