

# Flatback Sea Turtles



The flatback is named after its flat carapace, or shell, which is unlike the curved shell of other sea turtle species. The carapace is pale grayish-green in color with the outer margins distinctly upturned. The adults weigh 200 pounds and is approximately 3 feet in length. The flatback has the smallest distribution of all sea turtles species and only breeds and nests in Australia.

## Facts:

- Their scientific name is *Natator depressus*
- In comparison to other sea turtle species that lay 100-200 eggs per nest, flatbacks lay an average of 50 per nest. Their eggs and hatchlings however, are proportionally larger than those of other sea turtle species, which may aid hatchlings in evading predators in nearshore waters.
- This turtle is an omnivore, feeding on a variety of prey including sea cucumbers, jellies, soft corals, shrimp, crabs, molluscs, fish, and seaweed.
- They are listed as Vulnerable under the Australian Commonwealth's Endangered Species Protection Act.
- Because the flatbacks range is restricted their status is not classified internationally.



## Distribution:

The flatback has the smallest geographic range of the seven sea turtle species. Their distribution is restricted to tropical regions of the continental shelf and coastal waters of Northern Australia, Southern Indonesia, and Southern Papua New Guinea. This turtle does not have an oceanic phase or undertake long, open ocean migrations like other sea turtles, and are usually found in waters less than 200 feet in depth. Breeding and nesting only occur in Australia with the largest concentration of females nesting on Crab Island in the NE Gulf of Carpentaria in Queensland. Primary nesting beaches are distributed from East to West across Queensland, the Northern Territory, and Western Australia.

### Major Threats:

Threats to the Flatback turtle include direct harvest for meat and eggs, incidental capture in fishing gear, destruction of nesting beaches from coastal development, and pollution and destruction of feeding habitat (coral reefs and shallow nearshore areas). Dingos and foxes once posed a significant threat to their nests but thanks to predator control programs, this threat has been greatly reduced. Nests and hatchlings however are preyed upon by the Sand Monitor lizard, birds-including Night Herons and Pelicans, and feral pigs. In some areas, feral pigs consume almost all nests laid by Flatbacks.



### Did You Know?

- Flatbacks are preyed upon by Saltwater crocodiles, the largest reptile on earth. Adult female flatbacks have been observed being attacked by crocs while attempting to nest.
- Despite its small range and non-migratory behavior, until now the this turtle has been the least studied of the sea turtle species, perhaps due in part to the remoteness of much of their habitat.



### Links & Resources:

IUCN Red List of Endangered Species: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/14363>

Indian Ocean Sea Turtles Article: [http://www.ioseaturtles.org/headline\\_detail.php?id=1078](http://www.ioseaturtles.org/headline_detail.php?id=1078)

Caribbean Conservation Corporation Profile:  
<http://www.cccturtle.org/seaturtleinformation.php?page=flatback>

Mongabay Article: [http://news.mongabay.com/2009/0217-hance\\_flatback.html](http://news.mongabay.com/2009/0217-hance_flatback.html)



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