

# Sea Turtle Fact Sheet

## Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)

### Endangered Sea Turtles

Ancient ocean dwellers, sea turtles have lived on the Earth for 150 million years, since before the time of the dinosaurs. All seven species of sea turtles are endangered and protected under various national laws and international treaties. Sea turtles' hydrodynamic body shape and paddle-shaped limbs or flippers make them agile swimmers. Though fully adapted to marine life, sea turtles depend on land to complete the most critical stage of their life cycle, reproduction. They build their nests and deposit their eggs only on tropical and subtropical sandy beaches.

### Appearance

Adult green turtles have a carapace varying in color from black to gray to greenish or brown, often with bold streaks or spots, and a yellowish white plastron. The Pacific population of green sea turtles, which some scientists consider a separate species, is also known as the black sea turtle.

Each sea turtle has distinctive individual facial markings, similar to fingerprints. Many green sea turtles are recognizable by scientists on sight, and even recognize the scientists themselves on sight.

*Weight:* average weight is 300 lbs (136 kg)

*Carapace length:* 3.5 feet (1.07 meters)

### Status

The green sea turtle is endangered in Florida and the Pacific coast of Mexico, and is threatened elsewhere. This sea turtle was listed as threatened/endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act on July 28, 1978.

### Habitat and Feeding Behavior

Green sea turtles are the most widespread species of sea turtle, residing near 139 countries in the tropics and subtropics. They are found around North America, South America, Africa, Europe and Asia. Adult green sea turtles live around sea grass meadows, coral reefs, bays and estuaries in tropical and subtropical seas.

Green turtles are able to swim long distances,



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sometimes migrating up to 1,400 miles (2,253 km) between their feeding grounds and nesting site.

The most friendly sea turtle may be the "honu," the green sea turtles that live in Hawaii. These turtles are so comfortable with humans that they swim with people on diving trips among the coral reefs.

*Food:* Adult green sea turtles are herbivores, and their food includes sea grasses and algae. Young green sea turtles, however, are omnivores. Their diet includes jellyfish, small mollusks and sponges.

### Nesting

Green sea turtle females nest every 2 to 4 years, and sometimes lay up to 9 nests per season. Green sea turtles take 20-50 years to reach reproductive maturity. It is estimated that 100,000 to 200,000 females nest each year. The time of year when nesting begins and the duration of the nesting period vary from one region to another. They return to the same beach where they first hatched to lay their eggs. They lay from 75-150 eggs per nest, which hatch after 48-70 days. Hatchlings are about 1.75 to 2.375 inches (4.5-6.1 cm) long and weigh .9 oz (25 g)

*Primary breeding grounds:* the Caribbean, North and Central America, the Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean.

### Threats

The demand for green sea turtle meat, shells and leather has been enormous for many centuries.

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For example, in just one year, 15,000 green sea turtles were imported into England in the late 1800's.

Major threats to the survival of the green sea turtle include:

- ◆ large-scale poaching of adult turtles for meat, shells and leather;
- ◆ drownings of sea turtles in shrimp nets, tuna and swordfish longlines and other fishing gear;
- ◆ development and destruction of nesting beaches by humans;
- ◆ ocean pollution; and
- ◆ commercial exploitation of sea turtle eggs.