

Sea Turtle Fact Sheet

Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*)

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

The Kemp's ridley is the smallest of all sea turtle species. The shell ranges in color from an olive to gray-green and is oval or heart shaped.

Weight: 90 lbs (41 kg)

Carapace length: 2 feet (61 cm)

Status

Of the seven species of sea turtles, the Kemp's ridleys, until recently, were considered the most endangered. They were listed on December 2, 1970, under the Endangered Species Act. There are approximately 2,500 nesting females left in the world today. However, just 50 years ago, 40,000 females were filmed nesting in just one day on a single beach.

Habitat and Feeding Behavior

Kemp's ridleys live in shallow coastal areas, bays, and lagoons. While they are primarily located in the Gulf of Mexico, Kemp's ridleys do migrate up and down the Atlantic Coast.

Food: The food of the adult Kemp's ridley includes crabs, shrimp and fish.

Nesting

Female Kemp's nest only in the Gulf of Mexico. It is the only sea turtle that consistently nests during the day. Kemp's ridleys take approximately 11 to 35 years to reach reproductive maturity.

Kemp's ridleys and Olive ridleys share a phenomenal nesting behavior known as the *arribada* (which means



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“arrival” in Spanish). Breeding female turtles congregate in the waters in front of the beach and, on some as yet unknown cue, emerge from the sea all at once.

Nesting season usually occurs from April to July. Kemp's ridleys lay about 100 eggs in each nest. Egg incubation takes from 48 to 62 days depending on the temperature of the sand. The average hatchling is 1.75 inches (4.5 cm.) in length, weighs .6 oz. (17 grams), and has a gray-black color. Eggs are ping-pong ball shaped and sized, and have a soft leather-like shell, that hardens as the hatchling turtle inside it matures.

Primary breeding grounds: Today, the most significant nesting sites of the Kemp's ridley are at Rancho Nuevo and Veracruz, Mexico. A small, but growing, number of females is re-establishing a nesting colony at Padre Island National Seashore, on the Texas coast.

Threats

Major threats to the survival of the Kemp's ridley sea turtle include:

- ◆ drownings of sea turtles in shrimp nets;
- ◆ commercial exploitation of sea turtle eggs;
- ◆ ocean pollution; and
- ◆ development and destruction of nesting beaches by humans.

