

Sea Turtle Fact Sheet

Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*)

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 leatherback is the only sea turtle without a shell. Its outer protection is a leathery, scaleless skin made of tough, oil-saturated tissue raised into seven prominent ridges, giving rise to its name. Its back is brownish-black with white spots.

Weight: 1,100 pounds (499 kg)

Carapace length: 6 feet (1.8 meters)

The largest known sea turtle was a male leatherback, found on the coast of Wales in 1988. It was 9.5 feet long (about 3 meters) and weighed almost 2,000 pounds (908 kg).

Status

The leatherback sea turtle was listed as endangered on June 2, 1970 under the Endangered Species Act. The Pacific population is in imminent danger of extinction.

Habitat and Feeding Behavior

Leatherbacks live all around the world, in both tropical and subtropical waters of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Highly migratory, they have been spotted as far north as Nova Scotia and as far south as Chile. The leatherback is the only sea turtle that regularly visits the Pacific coast of North America. They dive deeper and swim into colder waters than other sea turtles because of their ability to regulate body temperature and their greater body fat. Adult leatherbacks have been known to dive up to 4,922 feet (1,500 meters) deep.



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Food: Jellyfish, especially "lion's mane" jellyfish. Turtles often mistake plastic bags for jellyfish and choke on them.

Nesting

It takes leatherbacks 8 to 15 years to reach reproductive maturity. Like all other sea turtle species, they return to the beach where they hatched to lay their eggs. Leatherbacks lay 50-180 eggs per nest and incubation takes 50-55 days. Hatchlings are tiny, only 2 to 2.25 inches (5 to 6 cm) long and weigh 1.6 oz (45.8 g). Their predators include ghost crabs, herons, dogs, mongooses and ants.

Primary breeding grounds: Pacific coasts of Mexico and Costa Rica; French Guyana and Suriname in the western Atlantic and Gabon in the eastern Atlantic; the Caribbean coasts of Costa Rica, Trinidad and Colombia; and Indonesia.

Threats

The world population of this sea turtle is estimated between 30,000 and 40,000. Today, Pacific leatherback populations appear to be "crashing." This means that the number of leatherback sea turtles in the ocean is dropping quickly and dramatically. Scientists believe commercial fishing is the most likely cause of the decline. Between 1985 and 1995, the number of leatherback nests at a key beach in Mexico dropped from 6,500 to less than 500. The South American swordfish fishery expanded tremendously during this same time and may be a significant factor.

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Major threats to the survival of the leatherback include:

- ◆ the accidental capture and drowning of sea turtles in the tuna and swordfish fisheries;
- ◆ commercial exploitation of sea turtle eggs;
- ◆ development and destruction of nesting beaches;
- ◆ ocean pollution; and
- ◆ ingestion of plastic bags and other garbage.