

All About Turtles

Turtles have been swimming in our oceans since well before the dinosaurs, with fossil records suggesting they have been around 100 million years!

There are now seven species of marine turtles in the world's oceans. These are the flatback turtle, green turtle, loggerhead turtle, Olive Ridley, leatherback, hawksbill turtle, and Kemp's Ridley.



Australia is home to six of these species, with the Kemp's Ridley being the only one not a visitor to Australian waters. Turtles are large air-breathing reptiles. They have scaly skin and regulate their body temperature through external temperatures, like other reptiles. They give birth by laying eggs. Where fish have gills, turtles need to rise to the surface to take a breath of air (although they only need to do this once every 15-20 minutes while feeding, and surface for air every 30 minutes when sleeping). Unlike mammals, baby turtles are on their own from the time eggs are laid.

Turtles have very strong front flippers for swimming, while the back flippers are used for steering and digging nests in the sand. Their sight and hearing are good when underwater, but when up on the surface, neither is very good. Turtles drink the water they swim in; however, they have salt glands behind their eyes that remove salt from the water. This can make it appear as if they are crying.

Female turtles dig nests on sandy beaches to lay their eggs, perhaps trying several spots before finding the right one. They then lay between 60 and 120 eggs (depending on age and species). The eggs take 8 to 12 weeks to hatch. When they hatch, they will wait under the surface of the sand for night so they can run to the ocean when there are fewer predators and when the temperatures are cooler, meaning they are at less risk of suffering from dehydration. For every one thousand hatchlings that run to the water, only about one will survive to become an adult.



The hatchlings will crawl together to the sea and then swim for several days to reach the ocean currents that take them far away. They may drift with the current for several years, eating seaweed and other small plants and animals. Scientists know very little about this period and therefore refer to it as the 'lost years'.

At some point between the ages of 5 and 15 years, they leave the open ocean and head for a coastal feeding ground.



They don't have offspring of their own until they are about 30 or 40 years old. When they are ready to breed, they head back to the beach (or very close by) where they hatched. Turtles make an incredible journey called a migration, which can be over 1000 km long, to reach their breeding and nesting sites. How do they find their way? Scientists believe that they use many clues to find their way, including reading the Earth's magnetic field, ocean currents and the angle of the sun.

When in breeding condition, many females mate with many males anywhere from where they forage to where they are going to nest, and then wait until the cool of the night to climb onto the beach in search of a nesting site. When she has laid her eggs, the female turtle will then make the long and dangerous swim back to her feeding areas. A female marine turtle may lay 3-7 nests in one season, but will only breed every few years.



Marine Turtles Life Cycle

