

Turtles



**Let me introduce my most
favourite animal in the world.**

The Turtle



A symbol of long life

I used to live in Fiji. I was given a Turtle necklace by a very good friend over there. It was to wish me a good long life. That's because a turtle can live up to 200 years.

I now wear that necklace every day.

In aboriginal terms, they are a symbol of being laid back and relaxed and a lot of people think I am like that too.

However I love turtles because when you swim with them, they are the coolest creature in the world.

You'll even notice there is one on my company logo



So what is a Turtle?

Turtles are reptiles. They are characterised by their bony shell which is actually developed from their ribs and acts as a shield.

Turtles date back as far as 215 million years ago, making turtles one of the oldest reptile groups and more ancient than lizards, snakes and even crocodiles.

They are a cold blooded animal and hence their internal temperature varies according to the environment around them.

Even though they spend most of their lives in the ocean, they breathe air just like us.



How does a turtle sleep?

Turtles have the ability to slow their heart rate dramatically when they want to sleep.

They will draw their last breathes for the night and then swim to the bottom of the ocean and find a protected hole where they will stay the night.

They can stay down for up to 10 hours at a time. However if they are disturbed, they have to come back to the surface for more air. They will then try and find the exact same sleeping spot for the night and should they not find it, they will stay up all night trying to find it, possibly leading to a sleepless night. So we have to be careful when diving at night not to disturb them



How does a turtle reproduce?

Turtles lay eggs on a beach. They crawl up the beach, dig a big hole and then lay their eggs in the hole.

Strangely enough they will always return to the place they were born to lay eggs if possible.

The area around central Queensland is a wonderful spot to see turtles laying eggs, particularly in the Heron Island region.

They usually lay their eggs around October/November.

Once in the sand, they incubate and eventually the newborn cracks through the shell, digs its way to the surface and makes a run for the water edge.

Unfortunately a great deal won't make it to the water as birds swoop on them and take them.

Approximately 10% of newborns make it to maturity



Sea Turtles

Whilst there are numerous freshwater turtle species, we are going to focus on the sea turtle. Sea turtles are much larger than freshwater turtles, often more than a meter long.

Whilst they live in the sea, they have to stay close to land in order to lay eggs.

Australia's sea turtles are usually found in tropical waters. The majority of turtles are found in the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland however they are seen in most states.



Types of Sea Turtles

There are 6 types of sea turtles found in Australia.

- Green Turtle
- Flatback Turtle
- Loggerhead Turtle
- Pacific Ridley Turtle
- Leatherback Turtle
- Hawksbill Turtle



Green Turtle

The 1.5m-long Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) is Australia's most common and largest hard-shelled sea turtle. It is also widespread in the world, and found in Australian waters along the northern, eastern and south-eastern coasts between Shark Bay in the west and Streaky Bay on Eyre Peninsula in the south. Juveniles are carnivorous but adults eat seagrasses and seaweeds.

They are called Green turtles not because they are green. In fact they get the name because the Aboriginals used to cook them up and when they are cooked, their fat turns green.



Flatback Turtle

The Australian Flatback Turtle (*Natator depressus*) is Australia's only endemic turtle meaning it is only found here in Australia. It is found along the northern coast between Broome in West Australia and Brisbane on the East Coast.

The Australian Flatback Turtle is a carnivorous turtle that eats sea cucumbers, soft corals and jellyfish and risks to be killed by plastic bags floating in water. The species is very vulnerable.

They are called Flatback because of their obvious flat backs.



Loggerhead Turtle

The large-headed Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*) is found along Australia's northern and south-eastern coasts between Exmouth in the west and Port Lincoln on Eyre Peninsula in the south, but is most abundant in the Great Barrier Reef.

Loggerhead sea turtles are mostly carnivorous and eat molluscs, crustaceans, sea cucumbers and jellyfish.

It is an endangered species and a plastic bag floating in water will kill it because it will mistake it for jellyfish.



Pacific Ridley Turtle

The 60-75cm-long Pacific Ridley Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) is the smallest of Australian sea turtles.

It lives in tropical waters of Pacific, Indian and parts of Atlantic Ocean, and is found in Australia's far north – the coast of the Cape York Peninsula in Queensland and the Top End in Northern Territory. It feeds on small crabs and shellfish.

The Pacific Ridley Turtle is not very common in Australia.



Leatherback Turtle

Australia's only leathery sea turtle, the Leatherback Turtle, or Luth (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is huge – up to 2.8m long and weighs up to almost one tonne.

Being such a large animal, the Leatherback Turtle is unique among reptiles to be endothermic. This physiology enables the Leatherback Turtle to enter cold waters and dive to extraordinary depths of more than 1100 metres.

The Leatherback Turtle is a dietary specialist and eats only jellyfish – which makes it particularly vulnerable for plastic bags in the water.

Its crucial rookeries are heavily exploited and the species is endangered. In Australia, it is found between Rockhampton and Yorke Peninsula in the east, and between Darwin and Perth in west.



Hawksbill Turtle

Hawksbill Sea Turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) live in tropical and temperate waters around the world, and they are found along Australian northern coasts between Exmouth in the west and Eden in the east.

They particularly like rocky areas and coral reef. Hawksbill Sea Turtles eat mainly sponges, but also molluscs, seagrasses and soft corals.

The beautiful overlapping scutes on their shell have made them popular within the tortoiseshell industry and the species is vulnerable.



Dangers to turtles?

There are many types of issues that place the sea turtles in danger. Nesting has become a primary concern. During the breeding season the female can nest more than once, and when this lumbering beast comes ashore it places itself in a very vulnerable position.

Settlement and recreational development have encroached on nesting areas which can force a female to use a less suitable nesting area or to abort her eggs altogether. Artificial lighting like neon signs and street lights disturb turtles and confuse them. It is believed that turtles navigate between the beach and the ocean using reflected light, and man made lights may distort their vision.



Dangers to turtles?

Sea turtles are unintentionally caught and drowned by vessels that use trawl nets. Unfortunately for the tangled turtles, the nets are not hauled in fast enough to save them.

Another issue with the nets is when fishing boats illegally discard them into the ocean. Turtles can get caught up in them and drown.

Gill nets and dredging for oil and gas are also responsible for destroying habitat and injuring sea turtles.



Dangers to turtles?

Turtles love Jelly Fish. In fact I think they like it just the same way we like Chocolate Cake. I saw a turtle eating a jelly fish once and he looked like he had the biggest smile on his face.

Unfortunately a plastic bag looks like a Jelly Fish. So when one is floating in the water, the turtle thinks it's 'Chocolate Cake'



Dangers to turtles?

In a turtles throat there are bones pointing backwards. It means that anything they eat gets stuck in their stomach and can't come back out.

If we ate a plastic bag we would spit it back out, a turtle can't do that. So the bag ends up stuck inside them and can make them really sick or even kill them.

The turtle below was believed to be 160 years old when they found him and rescued him. He was a lucky turtle.



Dangers to turtles?

As boats get bigger and quicker, the slow moving turtle has another issue to face. As the speeding boat comes past, they try to duck out of the way but often they are too slow and end up being hit.

Some are lucky and their shell protects them, others are not so lucky.

In fact in Queensland, there is a really big fine if you are found to have hit a turtle with your boat.



Dangers to turtles?

These days people try to catch Crabs in a device known as a Crab Pot. Unfortunately the bait they use is yummy even for a turtle so if they can, the turtle will swim into the crab pot to get the food.

Sometimes they can't find a way out and drown.



What can you do to help?

There are lots of things you can do to help save our turtle but I am going to focus on one thing.



Say no to plastic bags



Every time you say no to a plastic bag,
you could save a turtle.

Say no to plastic bags

- When you go to the shop next and they offer you a plastic bag, you can say no. You can use a box, a green bag or maybe just carry the items in your hand
- Make mum and dad say no to plastic bags
- Tell your friends not to use plastic bags

If there are no plastic bags in the ocean then turtles won't eat them and that will make everyone happy.



A sea turtle is swimming towards the camera in clear, blue water. The turtle has a dark, patterned shell and its flippers are extended. In the bottom left corner, there is a dark, rocky reef structure. A light blue speech bubble with a black outline is positioned above the turtle's head, containing the text "Thanks for helping me!".

Thanks for
helping me!