



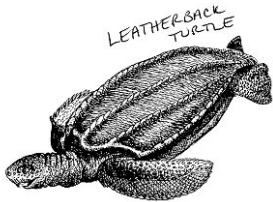
Protected Species - Sea Turtles

Description and Status



There are five species of sea turtles found along the Cape Hatteras National Seashore – the leatherback, hawksbill (rarely seen), Kemp’s ridley, loggerhead and green. In the 1970s, the Kemp’s ridley, leatherback and hawksbill were listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act as Endangered and the loggerhead as Threatened. The green, listed on July 28, 1978, is currently designated as Threatened in its entire range except in the breeding populations in Florida and on Mexico’s Pacific coast, where it is listed as Endangered.

Life History

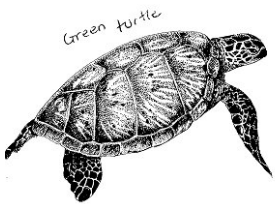


Sea turtles, some of the largest living reptiles, are long-lived, cold-blooded, air breathing, migratory, and spend almost their entire lives in the sea. The five sea turtle species found in this area range in size from the Kemp’s ridley at about 22-30 inches and 77-93 pounds to the leatherback, largest of all turtles, at an average of 61 inches and 640-1300 pounds.

Although sea turtles live most of their lives in the ocean, all adult females lay their eggs on land. They often migrate long distances between foraging grounds and nesting beaches. Loggerhead, green, leatherback, and hawksbill sea turtles regularly nest on beaches within the

U.S. The Kemp’s ridley nests almost exclusively on the Gulf of Mexico beaches in Mexico and Texas. The nesting season depends on the turtle and the locality but occurs between April and November. Sea turtles are generally nocturnal nesters that prefer sandy beaches with minimal disturbance. They may lay several clutches in one nesting season with clutch sizes ranging from 50-200 eggs depending on the species. Incubation periods and the sex of the hatchlings are dependent on the sand temperature. Hatchlings generally emerge at night. Survival to maturity rate varies with the species and ranges from 10-30 years.

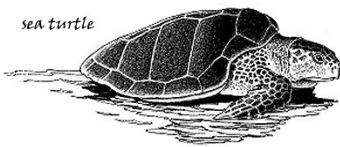
Threats



Major threats to sea turtles include:

- Habitat modification and destruction including coastal development, beach erosion, beach armoring, beach nourishment, and marina and dock development
- Exotic dune and beach vegetation
- Predation
- Weather events
- Incidental capture in commercial and recreational fisheries
- Entanglement in marine debris
- Vessel strikes
- Pollution
- Poaching
- Recreational and commercial development including artificial lighting, and pedestrian and vehicular traffic
- Dredging
- Oil exploration
- Disease

Sea Turtles on the Cape Hatteras National Seashore



Cape Hatteras National Seashore lies near the extreme northern limit of nesting loggerheads, greens and leatherbacks, with loggerheads being the most common here. Nest numbers on the Seashore have fluctuated greatly in the last twenty years with the fewest at eleven in 1987 and the peak of 101 in 2002.

In 2004, fifty sea turtle nests were reported laid between May and August; a decline from previous years. A total of 1,870 eggs hatched with 1,609 hatchlings emerging, which was low for the second consecutive year due to hurricane impacts. These storms caused erosion and water inundation, which destroyed fifty-eight percent of the nests, including the one leatherback nest.

Of the 128 turtle crawls, 78 were false crawls or aborted nesting attempts; a significant rise from previous years. Possible reasons for this high number of false crawls include human activity as most of these crawls were located in off-road vehicle areas, day use areas, and near the villages.

During much of the year, non-breeding sea turtles can also be found in the nearby waters, especially inshore sounds. Unfortunately, their presence is usually noted when one is found stranded. In 2004, 97 stranded turtles including loggerhead, green, Kemp’s ridley and leatherback were documented on both the ocean beach and soundside; a decrease from 2003.