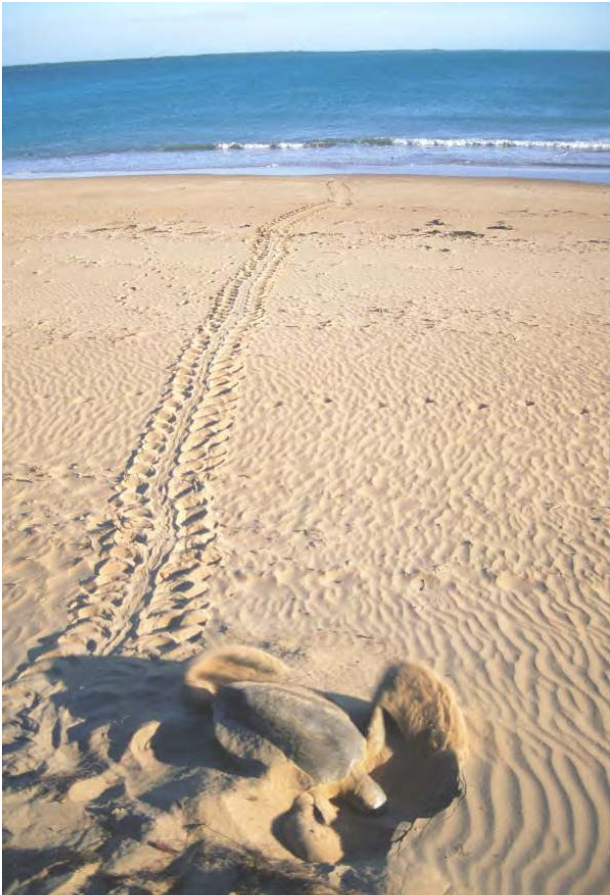


Marine Turtles in the Northern Territory

What are Marine Turtles?

Marine turtles are air breathing reptiles which evolved around 200 millions years ago. They are one of the few animal groups which have survived from the period of the dinosaurs until present day. Turtles are found throughout tropical and sub-tropical waters of the world. Six of the world's seven species of marine turtles occur in the waters of the Northern Territory with five of these species known to nest on the sandy beaches of the NT.



Nesting flatback turtle. Photo: Scott Whiting

Life History

The life cycle of sea turtles is complex. Adult female turtles lay eggs on sandy beaches in the tropics and sub-tropics. The eggs incubate in the sand for six to eight weeks. The hatchlings break out of the nest and make their way to the sea then swim for the open ocean where they spend the next three to ten years of their lives. Most species then move to shallower water where they feed on animals and plants from the sea floor. This may be many hundreds or thousands of kilometres from where they were born but it usually becomes their permanent foraging area for the remainder of their life. When they reach maturity, they migrate back to their original beach to mate and the females lay eggs to begin the cycle again.

The NT has:

- has the largest nesting population of olive ridley turtles in Australia
- has the only regular nesting in Australia by leatherback turtles
- has one of the largest foraging areas for green turtles in Australia (southern Gulf of Carpentaria)
- has one of the largest foraging areas for hawksbill turtles in Australia
- is a conservation stronghold for most sea turtles in the south-east Asian region

Species	Scientific Names	Habitat	Diet	Nests in NT	Interesting fact	Status (International) (Australia)
Green	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	Inshore seagrass and coral and rocky reefs	Seagrass, algae,	✓✓	Used for food by Indigenous peoples around the world	Endangered Vulnerable
Hawksbill	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>	Coral and rocky reefs	Algae, sponges	✓✓	Previously used to make tortoise shell jewellery	Crit. Endangered Vulnerable
Olive ridley	<i>Lepidochelys olivacea</i>	Soft bottom habitat down to 200 m	Molluscs (snails), crabs	✓✓	Smallest turtle – about 35 kg	Endangered Endangered
Flatback	<i>Natator depressus</i>	Soft bottom – down to 100m depth	Sea cucumbers, crabs, cuttlefish	✓✓✓	Only nests in Australia	Data Deficient Vulnerable
Leatherback	<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>	Open ocean	Jellyfish	✓	Largest of the sea turtles – up to 800 kg	Crit. Endangered Vulnerable
Loggerhead	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	Reefs and soft bottom	Molluscs and crabs		Nests in sub tropical areas – not NT	Endangered Endangered

✓✓✓ Common throughout the NT ✓✓ Common in parts of the NT ✓ Rare in NT & Aust.



Green turtle. Photo: Gary Bell.



Nesting turtle. Photo: Gary Bell

Sources of Mortality

In the Northern Territory the main sources of mortality and impact are:

- Entanglement in ghost nets (discarded nets)
- Ingestion of rubbish
- Commercial harvest in nearby countries
- Unknown harvest levels by Indigenous peoples
- Habitat destruction
- Boat strike
- Egg predation by feral animals
- Climate change

Conservation and Management

Globally, all species of marine turtles are listed as 'endangered' by IUCN, except the hawksbill and leatherback turtles, which are listed as 'critically endangered', and the flatback turtle, which is listed as 'data deficient'. All marine turtles are protected under Northern Territory and Australian legislation. They are also protected under several International agreements including CITES which regulates trade in endangered species.

Indigenous people in northern Australia have had a close relationship with sea turtles for thousands of years and turtles form an integral part of ceremony and nutrition. Many Indigenous communities continue to practise a customary harvest

Many groups within the northern Territory are involved with sea turtle research and conservation including: NT Government, Natural Heritage Trust, local Indigenous Sea Ranger Groups, NAILSMA, and Charles Darwin University, WWF Australia and Conservation Volunteers Australia.

Research

Research of marine turtles in the NT includes the following:

- Mapping the distribution and density of turtles nesting in NT
- Mapping marine habitats used by marine turtles
- Developing a marine stranding database
- Developing long term monitoring projects

Useful Websites

www.nt.gov.au/nretas/wildlife/
www.austurtle.org.au
www.ioseaturtles.org
www.seaturtle.org
www.kabc.org.au
www.cva.org

For more information contact the Marine Biodiversity Group.
Email: marine.nretas@nt.gov.au Web: www.nt.gov.au/marine

Ways to become involved

- Register with Parks and Wildlife to view sea turtle hatchlings released from Casuarina Beach between May and October each year
- Participate in Clean up Australia Day
- Learn more about turtles by visiting websites listed here