

# Green Turtle

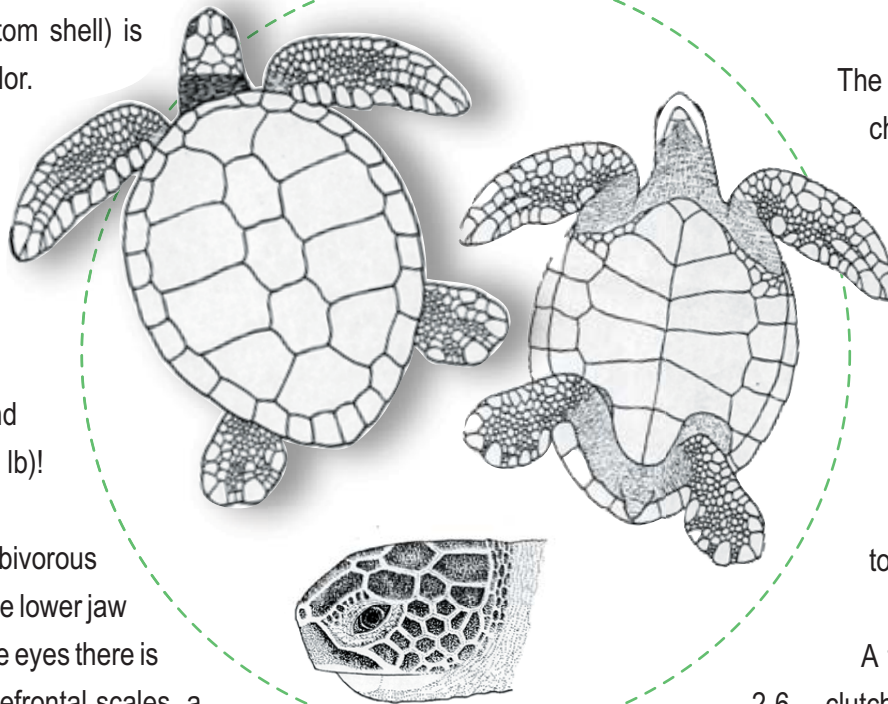
*Chelonia mydas*

## General Description

The green turtle, or green-back, has an oval, bony carapace (top shell) covered with smooth, non-overlapping scutes. Like the hawksbill, the green turtle has four pairs of lateral scutes. The carapace of the adult varies from light to dark greenish brown in color with patterns of radiating wavy or mottled markings, while the plastron (bottom shell) is white to yellowish in color.

From an average hatchling length of 49 mm (2 in), adults are generally 95-120 cm (36-40 in) in carapace length and weigh up to 230 kg (500 lb)!

Green turtles are herbivorous and the biting edge of the lower jaw is serrated. Between the eyes there is one pair of enlarged prefrontal scales, a feature unique to green turtles. Each front and back flipper has a single claw. Hatchlings are "counter-shaded" (black above, white below) to camouflage them in the open sea during their earliest years.



## Nesting Distribution and Behavior

Small numbers of green turtles nest on the majority of islands and mainland territories of the Wider Caribbean. Major nesting colonies are found at Tortuguero (Costa Rica) and Aves Island (Venezuela). The peak Caribbean breeding season occurs between July and September.

The nest site is characterized by a deep body pit, well above the high water mark. Symmetrical tracks in the sand 100-130 cm across (40-52 in) indicate that a turtle has come ashore to deposit her eggs.

A female lays between 2-6 clutches per breeding season and typically deposits 110-115 golf ball-sized eggs per clutch. The incubation period is approximately 8-9 weeks. After breeding, 2-3 years will elapse before a female breeds again.

## Did you know that...

- Green turtles are also known as the “soup turtle”!
- The largest present-day nesting colony in Tortuguero, Costa Rica, is increasing!
- Green turtles play an important role in the ecology of seagrasses!
- Green turtles do not reproduce until they are more than 30 years old!

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## Diet







Adult green turtles are herbivores and eat seagrasses, especially “turtle grass” and algae. Green turtles forage in shallow, near-shore waters throughout the Caribbean Sea. The turtles often form grazing scars, which they repeatedly re-graze to take advantage of new, tender growth.

## Why Are They Threatened?

Before the arrival of Columbus, coastal dwelling communities consumed green turtle meat and eggs as a source of protein. As European colonies were established, settlers exploited the large populations of green turtles intensively. By the early 1800’s, the largest nesting population in the Caribbean, the Cayman Islands, had been decimated. Several parts of the green turtle have commercial value: meat and calipee are used for soup; bone for fertilizer; oil for cosmetics; and eggs for food and traditional aphrodisiacs. The taking of turtles and eggs remains a serious problem throughout the Caribbean Region.

Green turtles also face a life-threatening disease in which growths called fibropapillomas can occur on several regions of their body, interfering with their ability to see, feed, breathe, swim, etc. Afflicted turtles should never be eaten.

## What Can You Do To Help? Please:

-  Do not buy or sell sea turtle products. Remember, international law prevents the transport of sea-turtle parts and products across national borders.
-  Do not harass sea turtles at sea or on land. Do not disturb turtles in feeding areas, shine lights on nesting turtles, ride turtles, or collect hatchlings.
-  Turn off, shield, or redirect coastal lighting to prevent it from shining on nesting beaches. Artificial lighting can fatally disorient nesting and hatching sea turtles.
-  Obey all regulations regarding the protection of coral reefs, seagrass, and natural beach vegetation.
-  Do not drive your car on the beach; incubating eggs can be crushed and tire ruts trap crawling hatchlings.
-  Support local and national conservation efforts. Be familiar with existing legislation, and encourage new legislation to strengthen protection for sea turtles and their habitats.

## WIDECAST

With Country Coordinators and partner organizations in more than 40 Caribbean nations and territories, the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) is an innovative, proactive and inclusive mechanism for sustainable development on a regional scale. By bringing the best available science to bear on decision-making, emphasizing information exchange and training, and encouraging harmonised practices, the network promotes strong linkages between science, policy, and public participation in the design and implementation of sea turtle management programmes.



# WIDECAST

Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network