

Turtle FAQ's

Q1. What are sea turtles?

A1. Sea turtles are marine reptiles. This means that they spend most of their lives at sea; some species are able to dive to depths of 3000 feet (900 metres). They are cold blooded, have scaly skin, breathe air and lay eggs. Turtles can stay underwater for up to three hours before returning to the surface for air. Unlike other reptiles they aren't strictly cold blooded and can raise their body temperature 8 °C (about 18 °F) above the temperature of the surrounding water.

There are seven species of sea turtles: Leatherbacks, Loggerheads, Hawksbill, Flatback, Green, Olive Ridley and Kemp's Ridley. Four of these species are found in the sea surrounding Costa Rica; Leatherbacks, Greens, Olive Ridleys and Hawksbills.

Q2. What do sea turtles eat?

A2. Sea turtles can spend months, years or, for some males, their entire life feeding in the open ocean hundreds or even thousands of kilometres from shore. The jaw structure of many species is adapted for their diet so depending on the species, sea turtles may be carnivorous (meat eating), herbivorous (plant eating), or omnivorous (eating both meat and plants).

The turtles found near Costa Rica have different diets:

- Leatherback turtles: Leatherback turtles have jaws that are similar to scissors. These turtles use their jaws

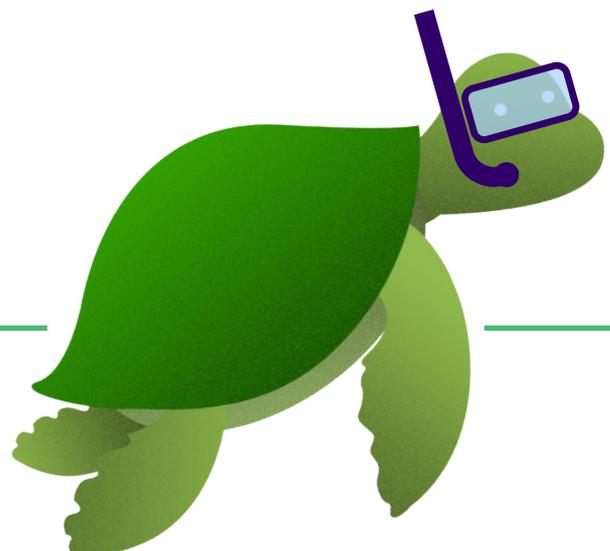
to spear jellyfish and other soft-shelled animals

- Green sea turtles: Green sea turtles have finely serrated jaws adapted for a vegetarian diet of sea grasses and algae
- Olive Ridley turtles: Olive Ridley turtles are omnivores, and they eat plants and animals like algae, fish, lobster, crab and urchins
- Hawksbill turtles: Hawksbill turtles have jaws that look a bit like a hawk's beak. This helps the turtle get food from hard to reach crevices. Hawksbill turtles feed off of sponges, shrimp and squid found around coral reefs.

Q3. How do turtles breed?

A3. The gender of sea turtle is not determined by sex chromosomes, but by the ambient temperature of the beaches where mothers bury their eggs. Hotter temperatures produce female turtles and colder temperatures produce males. Turtles mate at sea. Within a few weeks the female will then swim to shore. She will dig a nest and lay her eggs. After 45 to 70 days (depending on the type of sea turtle), the turtles will hatch, dig their way out of the sand and make their way into the sea.

Females often make long journeys to return to the same beaches year after year but the mother never goes back to check on her eggs after they've been laid. Many of the young die because they can't get out of the shell. Others become lunch for birds. Even in the water these younglings become food for many forms of aquatic life. Sadly, it is estimated that only 10% of the hatchlings will survive to adulthood.



Q4. Why are sea turtles endangered?

A4. There are many natural and human threats to turtles. Adult sea turtles have a few predators; tiger sharks are known for eating sea turtles and killer whales have been known to prey on Leatherback turtles. Fish, dogs, seabirds, raccoons, ghost crabs, and other predators prey on eggs and hatchlings. But the biggest threat to sea turtles comes from humans. These include entanglement in fishing gear, marine debris, climate change, illegal sea turtle shell trading and coastal habitat destruction.

Q5. How can humans ensure the beaches are 'turtle friendly'?

A5. There are a number of things we can do as humans to make sure we're taking turtle friendly precautions on the beach, it's as simple as keeping your distance and avoiding shining lights or taking flash photos of the nesting sea turtles.

These include:

- Using reputable agents that provide excursions for turtle spotting
- Remaining at a distance from nesting sea turtles and hatchlings
- Removing chairs, boats and other furniture and items from the beach at night to give the turtles and hatchlings space to nest
- Turn off or shield lights along the beach, in order to prevent hatchlings from getting confused and going toward lights on land instead of the sea water, where they belong
- Use red LED flashlights on the beach at night and don't take flash photos
- Fill in holes that people dug in the sand during the day, so nesting sea turtles and hatchlings don't fall in and get stuck there at night
- Correctly dispose of fishing line, so it won't entangle sea turtles and other animals
- Never harm, harass or take sea turtles, their eggs and hatchlings and don't get too close to a nesting female

