

## SEA TURTLES NEED OUR HELP!



Green turtle, Islas de Lobos, Fuerteventura © Louise Johnson

A brief introduction to sea turtles:

There are few more heart-warming sights in the world's oceans than sea turtles. These range from the huge leatherback (average size 6-7ft), down to the small (2-3ft) Kemp's ridley.

Most are hard shelled, with large scutes covering the back of the shell, the exception being the leatherback, which has a leathery shell with five long ridges down the back.

Habitat ranges from sheltered bays to the open ocean, with the leatherback in particular being an ocean wanderer, ranging between Norway and the Cape of Good Hope in the Atlantic, and Canada and New Zealand in the Pacific.

Most adult sea turtles are omnivorous, feeding on a wide variety of prey, except for the green turtle, which is herbivorous and feeds predominantly on seagrasses and algae, and the leatherback, which feeds almost exclusively on jellyfish.

Sea turtles mate at sea, and the males remain at sea while the females make their way ashore to lay their eggs in nests on beaches. Females may return to nest as many as eight times a season. The baby turtles mature in the egg for 45-80 days before hatching and making their way to the sea, where they will grow to maturity and start the reproductive cycle once more.

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Sea turtles are under threat:

Sea turtles suffer from a wide variety of threats to their continued existence ranging from habitat loss (seagrass, nesting beaches) through accidental bycatch in fisheries (long-lining, nets), poaching of nests for eggs, illegal hunting for food and for the tourist trade (shells). Many ocean going species suffer from ingesting plastics which they mistake for food, which can cause premature death.

However, many countries are now instigating turtle protection programmes, such as protection of nesting beaches against disturbance and poaching, and some fisheries are reducing their level of bycatch through the use of Turtle Excluder Devices. Progress is being made, but even so, populations of some are still severely depleted, such as the Pacific leatherback which some estimates believe may be down to as few as 2,300 females.

How you can help:

Most turtle population assessments are limited due to a lack of data, and the fact that the only reliable data comes from counting nests sites. Information received of sightings at sea made from ocean going yachts can therefore be very valuable in helping scientists to establish the wider picture about sea turtle populations. You can report your live sightings via the [Seaturtle](#) website, using a simple online form. As it can be difficult for the layman to tell one hard-shelled species from another, digital photographs can be useful, and can be attached to the form to aid identification. There's also a useful [ID guide](#) that can be opened from the form, showing shell shape and scute formation as well as head profile, to help you decide what species you've seen.

Ocean Cruising Club members are well placed to help scientists understand the distribution of sea turtles, which in turn should help to decide on appropriate ways to protect them – so get out your camera, record your sightings and send them in!

Colin Speedie