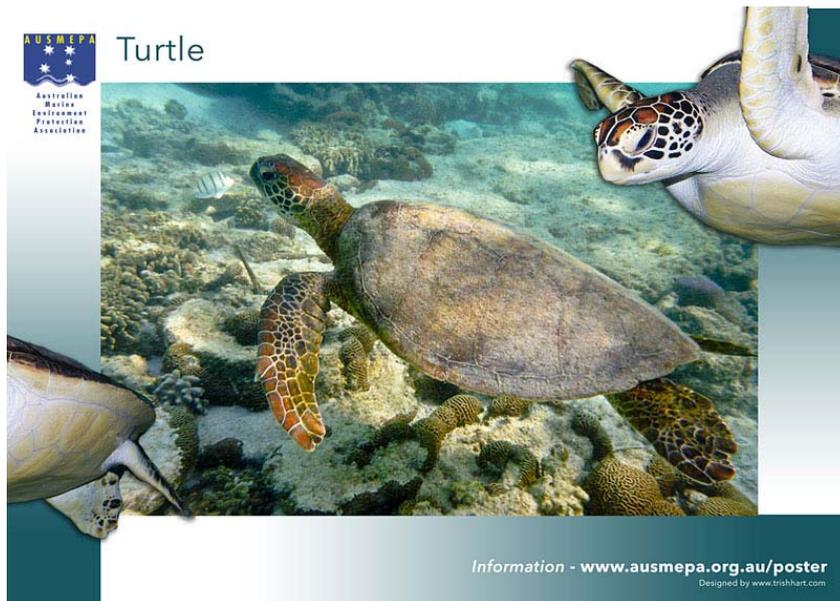


Sea turtle fact sheet



Sea turtles are reptiles. Their bodies are protected by a hard bony shell. The heads, short tails and four flippers hang out of their shells. These are covered in scales. They are cold blooded so their bodies will be the same temperature as the water they live in. Their shell is good protection from being attacked so they don't need to swim quickly.

There are seven species of sea turtles living in the world's seas. Six of these live in Australian waters. The first sea turtles were swimming in the sea 230 million years ago.

Turtles migrate long distances to reach their breeding grounds. They only come out of the water when they need to lay eggs. They slowly drag themselves high up onto a beach. They dig a hole in the sand and lay dozens of white round eggs. They cover their nest with sand and return to the sea. Australia has some the last large breeding areas for green, hawksbill and loggerhead turtles.

When the eggs hatch, the babies must get to the water as fast as they can so they are not caught by birds or land animals. In the sea the baby turtles are eaten by many animals. Only one or two baby turtles from a nest have a chance to grow to an adult. Once they are big they can live for 50 years.

The green turtles in the poster mostly eat seaweeds and seagrass.

Leatherback turtles feed on jellyfish. It is easy to mistake floating plastic bags for jellyfish. When leatherback turtles eat many plastic bags, they can jam up their stomachs and they will die.

All seven species of sea turtles need protection and most are endangered. In Australia their nests are raided by people, foxes, cats and other hunting animals. If turtles hatch near street lights, they can attract them and they might go inland. When they eat plastic litter that has washed off the land, the litter can kill them. Turtles are still hunted in many places. People in the past had sailing boats and hand spears to hunt. Now turtles are hunted using motor boats and guns or spear guns, so they are easier to find and kill. Turtles can drown if they get tangled in fishing nets.

Additional teacher notes

- The top part of the shell is called a carapace and the bottom a plastron. The shell is part of the skeleton which includes the backbone, ribs, pelvis and shoulder girdle. It is covered on the outside by thin layers of tissue and then large scales called scutes. The thin tissue is well supplied with nerves and blood.
- The reptiles with shells are called turtles, tortoises and terrapins. Sea turtles have flippers and no claws. Land tortoises (none living in Australia) have feet and claws for walking on land and are plant eaters. Terrapins have webbed feet with claws and live in America. In Australia the reptiles are called freshwater turtles. They have clawed web feet and eat small animals.
- The Flatback sea turtle is the only sea turtle that is endemic to the continental shelf of Australia