

Green Sea Turtle

Aquarium Location

Coast

Habitat

The green sea turtle will spend the majority of their time in shallow waters where vegetation is plentiful. They will migrate long distances from their feeding area to their breeding area.

Range

Green sea turtles are found around the globe in tropical and temperate seas and oceans. Breeding colonies occur in Florida and on the Pacific coast of Mexico.

Diet

Juveniles eat mostly crustaceans, mollusks and echinoderms while adults eat mainly vegetation (sea grasses and seaweed). When the juveniles reach about 8-10 in (20-25 cm) they will switch their diet and begin eating mainly vegetation.

Fun Facts

- Named the green sea turtle because its body fat is green
- The jaws of the adults are finely serrated on the edges for “cutting” vegetation
- Because their diet consists of mostly vegetation, they do not get much protein, so growth and sexual maturity are delayed
- May not reach sexual maturity until they are between 15 and 50 years of age; food availability, food quality and temperature are some factors that might influence the age at which maturity is reached
- Have been spotted sleeping under ledges in reefs or rocks
- Can survive up to 5 hours with no detectable oxygen in their lungs; when underwater for long periods like this, their heart beat slows to 9 minutes in between beats
- Have been seen basking in the sun close to the shoreline
- In South Carolina, they do not typically nest on the beaches
- Most important nesting ground, in the Western Hemisphere, is Tortuguero, which is on the east coast of Costa Rica
- Have remarkable navigational skills; one population is known to feed on the coast of Brazil, but nests on the Ascension Islands; the Ascension Island is about 5 miles (8 kilometers) wide and 1,400 miles (2,250kilometers) off the coast in the middle of the ocean

Conservation Connection

Green sea turtles are mostly herbivorous and spend time looking for algae and grass that grow in ocean shallows. Juvenile green turtles will eat plants as well as other organisms such as jellies, crabs, sponges, snails and worms. Often debris left by humans in the water can be mistaken for a sea turtle’s food. They will mistake something as simple as a plastic bag for a jelly and ingest the debris. Every year, sea turtles are killed as a result of ingesting this debris from careless boaters and beach goers.

Green turtle populations have declined dramatically, mostly due to the fact that they have so many predators—including humans. Even though a female can lay over 200 eggs in on clutch, some will not hatch, and many will be eaten. Even if individuals do hatch, many are eaten on their way to the water (by various species of birds, crabs), and in the water (by fish, sharks). So only a few will survive if any.

With natural predation rates so high, the additional pressure from human predation can easily decimate sea turtle populations. The few individuals that do survive can live to be over 100 years old and over 500 pounds, a formidable figure in any environment.

The major cause of decline of the green sea turtle has been the exploitation of it on both the nesting and feeding grounds. Populations have been severely depleted and not allowed to recuperate, and because of the high demand for its eggs and flesh for food, the turtle has already disappeared from many nesting beaches where it formerly was plentiful.

Cool Adaptation

Sea turtles accumulate a lot of excess salt in their body due to their diet consisting mainly of marine plants and other organisms. Turtles have to rid themselves of this high level of salt and have a special gland in their skull allowing them do this. The lachrymal gland allows the salt to be excreted in the form of tears. When a female sea turtle comes out of the water to lay her eggs, these tears can aid in keeping sand out of her eyes as well.