Turtles

remote, rare and remarkable

Image: © Mike Ball Dive Expeditions
Photographer: Julia Sumerling

"Green turtles are some of the most accomplished long-distance travellers on the planet."

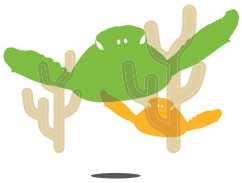
Professor Graeme Hays, Deakin University

Six of the world's seven sea turtle species — green, hawksbill, loggerhead, leatherback, flatback and olive ridley turtles, all endangered or vulnerable — visit the Coral Sea Marine Park. Green turtles nest on its beaches and hawksbill turtles feed on its reefs. Others keep moving through the ocean on their long migrations.

Did you know?

3880 km

is the longest known green turtle migration through the Coral Sea, more than the entire width of Australia's continent from Sydney to Perth.



About 1 in 1000

sea turtle hatchlings survive to adulthood. Those that do survive have a lifespan of about 80 years.

The exact temperature

of the nest determines the sex of green turtle hatchlings: at or below 26°C, all males; at or above 29°C, all females; in between, some of both.

Image: Turtle hatchling, Queensland, Australia. Courtesy of Tourism and Events Queensland.

Photographer: David Harasti

Photographer: Arthur Mostead

Turtle central

ancient, extraordinary creatures

Turtles have lived in the oceans for over 100 million years, since the time of dinosaurs.

They are solitary creatures, travelling alone and rarely interacting. As cold-blooded reptiles, they can only survive in the tropics.

Sea turtles spend most of their time underwater but surface to breathe every 20 minutes or so. For longer dives lasting three hours or more, their heart rate slows radically to conserve oxygen.

Epic migrations

From the beaches where they hatch, baby turtles head straight for the ocean, not to be seen again until they appear in shallow waters to feed two to 10 years later. What happens during the 'lost years' and what determines their route is unknown.

As adults they migrate every few years to forage for food and to nest. The distances they travel vary widely between individuals, from less than 8 km to more than 2000 km. How they navigate across such distances has not yet been determined. Recent research suggests they may use the sun, adjusting their direction with each sunrise.

Nesting on Coral Sea cays

To breed, female green turtles return to a beach near their own birthplace to mate in nearby waters and lay their eggs in the sand.

Large numbers of green turtles arrive between October and April to nest on the sandy cays of the Coral Sea Marine Park. Outside these months their presence on the cays remains abundantly clear, as they leave behind large dug-out nests and tracks in the sand.

The migration puzzle

Recent research confirms that green turtles travel extreme distances between nesting and feeding grounds. What we don't yet know is why.

For example, individuals that nest in New Caledonia were found feeding on Heron Reef (Great Barrier Reef), while others that nest on nearby Heron Island were found feeding in New Caledonia.

Why did the Heron Reef nesters travel 1300 km to feed when food was just as available on Heron Island? Could it have something to do with patterns set during the 'lost years'? Turtles are very good at keeping secrets, so this mystery remains unsolved.

Image: Turtle hatchling, Queensland, Australia
Courtesy of Tourism and Events Queensland

Photographer: Brocken Inaglory

Photographer: Andy Warmbrunn, Parks Australia

Learn more

About the Coral Sea Marine Park: **parksaustralia.gov.au/coralsea**

About visiting the Coral Sea: **tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au**

About the epic migrations of sea turtles: **seaturtle.org**

The Coral Sea Marine Park is managed by Parks Australia.

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