

# Leatherback Sea Turtles



The largest of all sea turtles, and one of the largest reptiles on earth, leatherbacks range in size from 4-8 feet in length (1.2 - 2.4 meters) and weigh between 500-2000 pounds (225 - 900 kg). The average adult measures in between 5-6 feet (1.5 - 1.8 m) and weighs 600-800 pounds (270 - 360 kg). The oldest of all turtle species, it has been around for more than 150 million years! They have survived the mass extinction of the dinosaurs and has thrived until the last several decades when human interactions have taken a major toll on the population.

## Facts:

- Their scientific name is *Dermochelys coriacea*
- Leatherbacks can consume twice their own body weight in prey per day, feeding exclusively on soft-bodied invertebrates like jellyfish and tunicates. They have stiff, downward curving spines (known as papillae) in their mouth and throat which help them to capture and swallow prey.
- Unlike all other sea turtles, these giants possess a carapace (shell) covered with hard scales, also known as scutes. Their smooth, leathery skin covering a flexible matrix of bone. This specialized, flexible carapace allows them to dive to great depths unlike other sea turtle species. Their back is blackish in color and dotted with white, gray, and pinkish blotches. They also have longitudinal ridges that run the length of their carapace.
- Their widespread distribution and ability to tolerate cold water are due to thermoregulatory adaptations which allow them to maintain their core body temperature.
- They are considered Critically Endangered around the world by the IUCN Red List and listed as Endangered in the US.



## Distribution:

Leatherbacks have the widest distribution around the globe of all sea turtle species. They are found throughout the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans. In the Pacific, their range extends as far north as Alaska and south beyond the southernmost tip of New Zealand. In the Atlantic, they can be found as far north as Norway and the Arctic Circle and south to the tip of Africa. They are mainly pelagic (open ocean) wanderers but migrate to warm tropical and subtropical coastal regions to mate and nest.

### Major Threats:

The eastern Pacific nesting population has declined by over 90% in the last two decades due to incidental capture in commercial fishing gear, particularly longlines and gillnets. They are also vulnerable to harvest of eggs and meat for human consumption in many parts of the world. These ancient creatures are also vulnerable to ingestion of floating marine debris like discarded plastics. Plastic bags and balloons resemble their favorite prey, jellyfish and when ingested may block their digestive tract, preventing them from eating.

### Did You Know?

- The largest one on record washed up dead on the coast of Wales (UK) in 1988. It weighed over 2000 lbs and measured 9 feet in length! It's estimated the turtle was approximately 100 years old. The turtle had been drowned from entanglement in fishing gear. It is on display at the National Museums and Galleries of Wales in Cardiff.
- They can dive deeper than 4000 ft (roughly 1,200 m)! Sperm Whales, Beaked Whales and Elephant seals are the only other known animals on the planet that dive deeper.
- Researchers recently tracked an adult female more than 12,000 miles (19,000 kilometers) using satellite telemetry, from Indonesia to Oregon, one of the longest recorded migrations of any vertebrate animal. To read more about this incredible journey: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/02/080214144429.htm>



### Links & Resources:

IUCN Red List of Endangered Species: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/6494>

State of the World's Turtles Distribution map: <http://seaturtlestatus.org/learn/maps/leatherback>

Discovery of the world's largest leatherback nesting beach in Gabon: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/05/090517212653.htm>

National Geographic Article (May 2009)  
<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2009/05/leatherback-turtles/appenzeller-text>



These materials are provided by SEE Turtles, a non-profit project that protects sea turtles through conservation travel. Visit our website, [www.seeturtles.org](http://www.seeturtles.org) for other fact sheets, school lesson plans, fundraising ideas, presentations, and field trips. Contact us at [info@seeturtles.org](mailto:info@seeturtles.org) for more information.