

WORLDLY *travellers*

THE MISCHIEVOUS GREEN SEA TURTLE EMBODIES AN ANCIENT PAST AND A TRAVELLING SPIRIT AS IT MIGRATES THOUSANDS OF KILOMETRES BETWEEN FEEDING GROUNDS AND NESTING BEACHES TO BREED.

Prehistoric Marvel. With its lizard-like head, hooked beak and toothless jaw, the Green Sea turtle certainly looks the part of a prehistoric creature. The Green Sea turtle does not get its name from its shell but rather the green fatty deposits in its body, which are caused by its diet of sea grass and algae. Its shell can be green, brown, grey or black and usually grows up to one metre in length. The plates on its shell are called scutes and are usually streaked with reds or browns.

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Turtles have been swimming the earth’s oceans since the time of the dinosaurs, more than 100 million years ago. The Green Sea turtle is one of seven different species of marine turtle, six of which are found in Australian waters. However, despite their aptitude for survival, all seven species of turtle are now threatened due to poachers, predators, pollution and habitat destruction.

Well Travelled. Green Sea turtles live in temperate to tropical waters throughout most of the world and prefer the warmer waters of the northern and western coasts of Australia. They can be found in the shallow waters of bays, inlets and lagoons where there is an abundance of marine plant life.

Green Sea turtles are one of the world’s great travellers. They migrate thousands of kilometres between these feeding grounds and nesting beaches to breed. Female turtles come ashore to lay their eggs on special nesting beaches, where they dig a hole and bury their eggs. They will return to the same beaches every breeding season.

Baby Love. Green Sea turtles usually nest every 2 to 4 years, nesting between 3 and 5 times per season and laying an average of 115 eggs in each nest. The eggs are incubated for 64 days until they hatch and the baby turtles dig their way to the surface and scuttle into the ocean. Unfortunately for the turtles, predators such as birds, are waiting on the beach to snatch them up and there is a high juvenile mortality rate.

The sex of Green Sea turtle hatchlings is determined by the temperature of the nest from which they hatched. A nest with sand cooler than 26°C produces all male hatchlings, while sand warmer than 29°C results in all females. Nests with intermediate temperatures produce mixed sex hatchlings. Sadly this fascinating phenomenon could lead to the Green Sea turtle’s extinction. If nest temperatures become too high then there is a risk that all turtles will hatch as females, making breeding impossible.

Growing Up. Young Green Sea turtles are shiny black with white edges on their flippers and bellies. When they are hatched they are less than 5 centimetres long and weigh less than 25 grams. To reach the average adult weight of 200 kilograms, these hatchlings could increase their weight by 8000 times as they mature!

As hatchlings, Green Sea turtles are primarily carnivores, feeding on fish egg cases, sea jellies, sponges, worms and crustaceans. However unlike any other sea turtle, they convert to herbivores as they mature.

Melbourne Aquarium Helps Out. Several cases have occurred where curious turtles have accidentally travelled a little too far south from the tropical waters of northern Australia and found themselves washed up on Victorian beaches, almost 2,000 kilometres from home. Often in poor health, these lost turtles need a little help getting home. Melbourne Aquarium voluntarily rehabilitates these turtles until they are fighting fit and then returns them to the wild.

The divers at Melbourne Aquarium certainly have their work cut out for them when caring for the visiting Green Sea turtles. Their mischievous nature comes out during feeding time as they prod and peck at the divers to let them know that they’re still hungry. Turtles are responsible for more bites to the divers than any other animal in the Oceanarium but it is not because they are aggressive. Green Sea turtles have poor eye-sight and have a tendency to mistake the diver’s fingers for their dinner.



fast facts

NAME: Green Sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) **Length:** 1 metre **Weight:** 200 kilograms **Lifespan:** 80 years
Conservation Status: Vulnerable in Australia **Distribution:** Temperate to tropical waters worldwide
Features: Lizard-like head with a hooked beak, flippers, green body and a large shell.