



REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

LEATHERBACK TURTLE

ABOUT

The Leatherback Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is the largest turtle and living reptile in the world. A mature Leatherback can be as long as six and a half feet (2m) and weigh as much as 2,000 lbs (900 kg). It is the only sea turtle that does not have a hard, bony shell; instead its carapace is about 1.5 (4cm) thick and made up of leather and oil-saturated connective tissue overlaying loosely interlocking dermal bones. The carapace has seven ridges down its length, which ends in a blunt point. Adult Leatherbacks are black with a pinkish-white mottled abdomen and pale white and pink spotting on top of the head. Their front flippers do not have claws and the back flippers are paddle-shaped. All these attributes make the Leatherback uniquely equipped to travel great distances to forage for food. The female lays clutches of around 100 eggs on sandy, tropical beaches and will nest several times during the nesting season. Leatherback hatchlings emerge from the nest after 60-65 days. This species does not have the crushing chewing plates usual to sea turtles, who eat hard-bodied prey, but instead have pointed tooth-like cusps and sharp-edged jaws for eating soft open ocean prey, like jellyfish – and the backward-pointing spines in the turtles' mouths and throats help retain the gelatinous food.

DID YOU KNOW?

Adult Leatherbacks are the most wide-ranging sea turtle species, since they are able to tolerate a broad range of water temperature and can dive deeper than 3,900ft (1,200m). Nesting trends on beaches in the United States have been increasing in recent years, but generally this species is endangered around the world. Nesting populations are hard to monitor since females frequently change their nesting beaches. The World Conservation Union has noted that nesting populations have declined by 80% in the Pacific. Leatherbacks face threats both on nesting beaches and in the water. The continuing primary threats worldwide are long-term harvest of the animal and its eggs and incidental capture in fishing nets of all kinds.

For more information visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov and www.turtles.org.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Why are Leatherback nesting populations hard to monitor?

- a) There are too many beaches to count.
- b) Females frequently change their nesting beaches.
- c) People steal the eggs.
- d) The nests get blown away in high winds.

Answer is B.

