

Leatherback Turtle

Dermochelys coriacea

Bermuda Protected Species



GOVERNMENT OF BERMUDA

Department of Environment & Natural Resources



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Current Status

Native

BPSA: Level 1

CITES: Appendix 1

Bda Red List: CR A1a,b,d

CMS: Yes

Fisheries Order: Yes

Author:

Dr Mark Outerbridge

Senior Biodiversity Officer

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Ecology

Leatherback turtles are solitary, pelagic animals that dwell in the open ocean. They have unique physiological adaptations which allow them to inhabit extremely cold water and dive to depths greater than 3,000 feet. Bermuda does not have a resident aggregation of leatherback turtles but large individuals are occasionally observed migrating through the oceanic waters that surround the islands.

Identification

This species is gigantic in comparison to other sea turtles. The overall body coloration is black and covered with irregular white spots. The shell (carapace) is covered in skin, has seven longitudinal ridges and tapers to a distinct point. There are two sharp cusps on the upper jaw which interlock with a single sharp cusp on the lower jaw. Extensive papillae (fleshy protuberances) are found in the mouth and throat. Leatherback turtles can reach a curved carapace length of 159 cm and a total length (nose to tip of tail) of 291 cm (9.7 feet). Mass has been recorded to reach over 900 kg (2000 pounds).

Range

Leatherback turtles have a cosmopolitan global range, being found in tropical, subtropical and temperate oceans, that extends into the Arctic Circle.

Habitat

Sea turtles have a complex life cycle that requires many different habitats, depending on their stage of development, often involving many different nations.

Diet

Leatherback turtles mainly feed on gelatinous organisms which include jellyfish, siphonophores and salps. Young leatherback turtles (i.e. neonates and juveniles) feed in convergence zones in the open ocean during the epi-pelagic phase. Adults use the pelagic zone in temperate and subarctic waters and concentrate their foraging efforts near watermass boundaries and other areas of high productivity where their prey congregate.

Reproduction and Life Cycle

Sexual maturity is reached by the age of nine years.

Leatherback turtles nest on tropical and subtropical beaches, generally between 30°N and 20°S. Numerous eggs (approx. 115, of which one third usually do not have yolk) are laid in a deep chamber dug into the sand during the night. Incubation typically lasts for about two months (depends on temperature) and after hatching the baby turtles crawl to the sea where they spend a number of years drifting with oceanic currents. Growth is rapid and leatherback turtles are known to migrate thousands of miles between their feeding and nesting grounds.

Why protect this species?

Leatherback turtle populations throughout the world have been affected by:

- Harvest of eggs from nesting beaches
- Destruction/alteration of nesting grounds
- Incidental capture or entanglement in fishing gear (e.g. gill nets, lobster and crab pots, pelagic longlines)
- Ingestion of marine debris (especially plastic bags)

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What is being done to conserve it?

Leatherback turtles are protected under Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) which restricts their international trade.

Protected Species Act Listing: Level 1, 2012

IUCN Red List: Vulnerable A2bd ver. 3.1

Recovery Plan: A Monitoring Plan is in place for this species.

Research: Leatherback turtles have not been the focus of research in Bermuda because they are not a resident species.

Habitat protection: This species would benefit from protection being afforded to the Sargasso Sea.

Reporting injured animals: Members of the public can call or deliver injured sea turtles to the Bermuda Aquarium, Museum and Zoo, #17 North Shore Road, Flatt's Village, Bermuda. Tel (441) 293-2727.

Protective legislation

Fisheries Act (1972)

Protected Species Act (2003)

What you can do?

Learn: Understand how destruction of habitat leads to loss of endangered and threatened species and Bermuda's plant and animal diversity. Tell others what you have learned.

Do not litter: Marine debris is a serious threat to wildlife. Abandoned fishing line causes turtle entanglement and death by drowning.

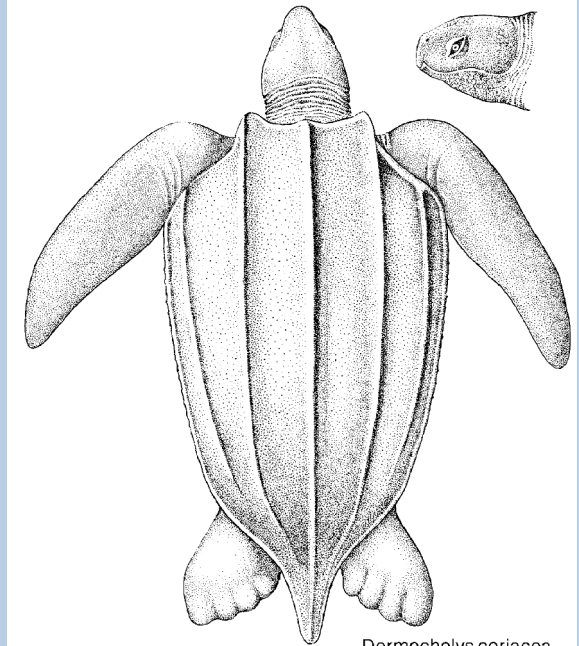
Operate motor boats and jet skis with caution when travelling through areas populated by sea turtles.

Join a conservation group such as the Bermuda Zoological Society or the Bermuda Audubon Society.

Information sources

Franklin, C.J. 2007. Turtles— An Extraordinary Natural History 245 Million Years in the Making. Voyageur Press. 89-95.

Stewart, K., and Johnson, C. 2006. *Dermochelys coriacea*— Leatherback Sea Turtle. *In:* Meylan, P.A. (Ed.) Biology and Conservation of Florida Turtles. Chelonian Research Monographs 3:144-157.



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For Further Information

#17 North Shore Road, Flatt's, FL04,
Bermuda (441) 293 2727.

www.environment.bm

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on the knowledge and understanding at the time of writing.