

FAST FACTS:

Green Sea Turtle

(*Chelonia mydas*)

The Hawaiian name for the green sea turtle is *honu* (pronounced hoe'-new).



CHRIS WADE / MARINE PHOTOBANK

APPEARANCE

Green sea turtles can grow up to four feet long and weigh as much as 440 to 500 pounds. They have a small head, a heart-shaped shell, and each of their flippers has a single claw.¹ Unlike other sea turtle species, which have two pairs of scales in front of their eyes, green sea turtles have a single pair.² Hatchlings (baby turtles) generally have a black carapace (upper shell) and a white plastron (bottom shell). Their shells and flippers may also have white margins. Adults have a smooth carapace that ranges from light to dark brown with dark mottling; the plastron is whitish to light yellow; and the head is typically light brown with yellow markings.³ The name, “green sea turtle,” comes from the color of their body fat⁴, a result of their vegetarian diet as an adult.

DIET

Unlike most sea turtles, adult green turtles are herbivorous, feeding on sea grasses and algae. These plants are often found in “pastures” at depths of about three to 10 meters, where sunlight can penetrate down to the bottom.⁵ Hatchlings (young or juvenile) eat a variety of marine plants and will also eat invertebrates like crabs, jellyfish and sponges.⁶



R. PEYTON

HABITAT

Except when they are migrating, green sea turtles prefer the shallow waters inside reefs, island coastlines and protected bays, lagoons and inlets. They like to bask in the sun on deserted beaches, where they soak up vitamin D.⁷



C. MORSHIGHE

BREEDING

On average, green sea turtles reach reproductive age at 20 to 50 years old.⁸ Once they reach maturity, adult male turtles migrate annually to breeding grounds. Females migrate only about every two to four years.⁹

Because green turtles tend to return to the same nesting sites, 90 percent of all Hawaiian green turtles breed and nest at French Frigate Shoals, a cluster of sand islets in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. There, nesting occurs from late April through September, but peaks in June and July. Each female digs a two-foot hole in the sand, where she deposits one to five egg clutches (containing 75 to 200 eggs)¹⁰ every 13 days.¹¹ After a period of about 60 days, the hatchlings emerge from the nest together—usually at night—and make their way down the beach and into the ocean.¹²



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THREATS



J. ASHER / NOAA

Green turtles face a large number of threats globally. In some countries (not in the U.S.), people harvest turtle eggs and adult turtles for their meat. Disease plays a significant role, too. Fibropapillomatosis is a disease that causes multiple tumors to grow on the turtles' skin and internal organs. These tumors can interfere with turtles' ability to see, swim, eat, breathe and reproduce, and they can eventually lead to their death.

Other serious threats include marine pollution and debris, which can interfere with turtles' feeding, causing disease and death; boat and ship strikes that injure or kill turtles; and active or derelict fishing gear, which can entangle turtles, causing them to drown.¹³

REFERENCES

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- ⁴ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, "Marine Life of Midway Atoll," Green Sea Turtle, <http://www.fws.gov/midway/turtle.html> (accessed May 27, 2010).
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- ⁶ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, North Florida Ecological Services Office, Sea Turtle Quick Facts, <http://www.fws.gov/northflorida/seaturtles/turtle-facts-index.htm> (accessed May 27, 2010).
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- ¹² U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, "Marine Life of Midway Atoll," Green Sea Turtle, <http://www.fws.gov/midway/turtle.html> (accessed May 27, 2010).
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