

Sea Turtles

Conservation Summary



State of the Species

Sea turtles (superfamily Chelonioidae) are found around the world, primarily in warm ocean waters though leatherbacks tolerate cooler temperatures. Most sea turtle species have a global or near-global distribution. Exceptions include Kemp's ridleys, which are primarily found along the central North American Atlantic coastline and the flatback, which is restricted to Australia and Papua New Guinea. All but the flatback occur in North American waters.

Populations of most sea turtle species have declined substantially. The Olive ridley is the most abundant, with an estimated 800,000 nesting females – many times more than any other species. At the other end of the spectrum, the Kemp's ridley is the most endangered with less than 10,000 nesting females. Sea turtles are often managed on an ecologically significant regional / population level, and there are many such threatened at this scale.

Sea Turtle Species and IUCN Status

Leatherback (<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>)	Vulnerable
Loggerhead (<i>Caretta caretta</i>)	Vulnerable
Green (<i>Chelonia mydas</i>)	Endangered
Hawksbill (<i>Eretmochelys imbricate</i>)	Critically Endangered
Kemp's Ridley (<i>Lepidochelys kempi</i>)	Critically Endangered
Olive Ridley (<i>Lepidochelys olivacea</i>)	Vulnerable
Flatback (<i>Natator depressus</i>)	Data Deficient
AZA Sea Turtle Working Group Chair	Mark Swingle

CITES Appendix I (all species)

Primary Threats to the Species

Sea turtles are long-lived oceanic animals that nest on sandy beaches and many travel long distances during their lifetimes. As such, these species are exposed to many threats. Sea turtles are susceptible to entanglement and incidental catch in fishing gear in all oceans. Some methods are particularly deadly to sea turtles, such as longlines, gill nets, and trawlers. Coastal development and degradation of on-shore nesting habitat are also critical threats, as are various other forms of land-based human disturbance, such as egg-collecting.

Though fisheries bycatch and coastal habitat degradation are common threats to all species, other threats exist that are more specific to species or populations. The tortoiseshell trade has devastated the hawksbill turtle, with millions of animals killed in the last century. In many parts of their ranges, sea turtles are harvested for meat or as fishing bait. Predictions indicate that the effects of climate change will also pose a serious threat for sea turtles, as for many other marine species.

AZA Conservation Support

Between 2010 and 2014, 54 AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums reported taking part in a variety of field conservation projects benefitting sea turtles, including the green, leatherback, Kemp's Ridley, Pacific Ridley, hawksbill, and loggerhead. Over those five years, the AZA community invested over \$14 million in sea turtle conservation. This work was frequently conducted in collaboration with federal and/or state agencies ranging from the US Fish & Wildlife Service to state wildlife management departments. Most programs focused on rescue, rehabilitation and reintroduction, nest sites, tagging individuals, conducting health assessments, participating in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network, and monitoring. AZA institutions provide crucial support to field conservation partners such as the Sea Turtle Conservancy – a non-profit membership organization focused on sea turtle research and advocacy campaigns. This is not an exhaustive list of organizations, but these efforts represent the significant ties that AZA-accredited institutions have with sea turtle-focused conservation organizations.



Primary References:

1. Sea Turtle Conservancy. 2016. <<http://www.conserveturtles.org/seaturtleinformation.php>>.
2. The State of the World's Sea Turtles (SWOT) reports. 2016. <<http://www.seaturtlestatus.org/report>>.

Learn more: <https://www.aza.org/safe-sea-turtle/>