

GEORGIA AQUARIUM ANIMAL FACT SHEET

Loggerhead Sea Turtle

Caretta caretta

Range/Habitat

- The loggerhead sea turtle is found in shallow coastal waters all over the world in the Atlantic to the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as well as the Mediterranean Sea.
- It occurs on muddy bottom bays of the northern Gulf of Mexico and off the Bahama Islands and the Antilles. It is unknown if these turtles move back and forth from such extremes or if different turtles prefer different habitats.

Physical Characteristics

- The upper shell (carapace) of the loggerhead sea turtle is reddish brown in color and the underside is yellow. As the turtle ages, the carapace can become covered in algae and barnacles giving it a green to gray color. Its skin is cream to yellow in color.
- These turtles can weigh from 200 to 350 lbs. (91 – 159 kg) and reach approximately 3 feet (91 cm) in length.
- Hatchlings are about 2 inches (5 cm) long.
- Unlike land turtles, a sea turtle is unable to tuck its head and legs into its shell which makes it vulnerable to its only natural predator: sharks.
- Sea turtles have no teeth but have powerful jaws to crush the food.

Diet/Feeding

- The loggerhead sea turtle primarily eats bottom dwelling invertebrates such as mollusks, clams, whelks, crabs, oysters, shrimp, sponges and horseshoe crabs.
- It is also a scavenger and rarely eats live fish
- Young turtles prey on jellies.

Conservation Status

- The loggerhead sea turtle is threatened worldwide due to by-catch by shrimp fisheries and destruction of nesting sites.
- Most recent evidence suggests that the number of nesting females in South Carolina and Georgia may be declining, while the number of nesting females in Florida appears to be stable.
- Because sea turtles nest on land, responsibility for their conservation is shared between the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Additional Information

- The loggerhead sea turtle was named for its large head.
- This species spends much of its time floating at the ocean's surface.
- It is thought it does not mature until the age of 20 and is believed to live well over 100 years.
- Loggerhead sea turtles have inhabited the oceans for millions of years, swimming at the same time that dinosaurs roamed the earth.
- This turtle passes its entire life in the ocean except for the nesting season when the female emerges at night, dragging her body up a beach to make a nest for her eggs.

Once she reaches an area on the beach well above the high water line or into the dune face, she digs a hole by scooping sand with her rear flippers. She then deposits the eggs, which resemble ping pong balls, and covers up them with sand, smoothing the sand out with her body to disguise its location from predators such as raccoons. She then returns to the sea. She will find her way back to the same beach every two or three years to make a nest and lay eggs.

- The eggs incubate for approximately 45 to 60 days, depending upon temperature and a variety of other factors. Hatchlings are active as soon as they break out of their egg. They emerge from the nest, after days of digging their way up through the sand, and make their way to the ocean. During this period, the tiny turtles fall prey to ghost crabs, birds, and other predators. Once in the water, hatchlings swim out to the nearest floating mass of sargassum weed and spend the first portion of their lives there -- feeding, growing, and drifting with the currents.
- The loggerhead turtle produces 50,000 to 70,000 nests per year along the Southeastern U.S. coast, distributed as follows: Florida (91%), South Carolina (6.5%), Georgia (1.5%), and North Carolina (1%). Mating season in this area is April through July and the turtles begin to nest in late June through early September. The average clutch size (number of eggs laid) is 100 to 125 eggs.
- The "lost years" is the period of time between hatching and the turtle's return to coastal waters as a juvenile. No one knows for certain where the newly hatched turtle spend its first 3 to 7 years. Of every 1,000 to 10,000 juvenile turtles that hatch, only two will grow up to become adults and reproduce.

Sources

Talking About Sea Turtles. Department of Natural Resources Film & Video, 1992.

Protected Animals of Georgia. Winn, B., pgs. 65 - 66

http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/prot_res/species/turtles/loggerhead.html

<http://endangered.fws.gov/i/c1t.html>

<http://www.nps.gov/pais/loggerhead.html>