



Marine Turtles

There are seven species of marine Turtles found in the world, including Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), Green (*Chelonia mydas*), Flatback (*Natator depressus*), Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) and Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*). Marine Turtles are among the most endangered reptiles in the world, so we are extremely fortunate to have six out of the seven species found along the Ningaloo coast (the only species not found in Australian waters in the Kemp's Ridley).

All Marine Turtles belong to the same family, Cheloniidae, except for the Leatherback, which is in the family Dermochelyidae. The Leatherback is the only Marine Turtle that lacks a hard, bony shell. A Leatherback's shell is approximately 4 cm thick and consists of leathery, oil-saturated connective tissue overlaying loosely interlocking dermal bones. The shell is a single piece with 5 ridges, and is distinctive from other Turtles who have plated shells. The Leatherback is the largest Turtle (almost 2m in length) and the largest living reptile in the world!

The other six species of Marine Turtles have a hard shell or carapace with a layer of plates called scutes. Shells vary in colour from black, grey, green, brown, yellow, red and olive depending on the species. Green Turtles are the most common species in Ningaloo as well as being the largest of all the hard-shelled Marine Turtles. They can reach a length of 1 metre and weigh 230 kg. The Green Turtle is named not for its shell colour (which is olive or brown), but for its body fat, which is green from the algae and grasses it consumes.

Turtles have four flippers that are adapted to give them the ability to sail through the water at great speeds. Shaped like paddles, their flippers are long and have either one or two claws, used to hold onto their partner's shell whilst mating. They have box shaped heads with very strong beaks used to crush prey such as crabs. Turtles have, however, a broad diet including jelly fish, molluscs, seagrass and sponges.

Marine Turtles have a remarkable nesting instinct, by which they return to exactly the same beach they were born at to lay their own eggs. Nesting season in Ningaloo occurs in the summer months between November and April, when approximately 1500-2000 Loggerhead turtles (the most endangered species of Marine Turtle in the world) nest in WA waters each year. A female Turtle will make its way up the beach to lay their eggs, often at high tide and usually at night. The female will first dig a 'body pit' and then an 'egg cavity' using her front flippers in which she will lay between 50 to 200 eggs, depending on the species. Once hatched, it sometimes takes the young turtles between 3 and 7 days to dig their way to the surface! Only around 75% of eggs will hatch, and of these, scientists have estimated that just 1 out of every 4000 Marine Turtle egg hatchlings will survive to adulthood. If they do survive, however, many Marine Turtles outlive some humans.

Did you know?

The sex of Turtle eggs is not determined by genetics, but by temperature. Higher temperatures will produce more females, and lower temperatures result in more males.