Leatherback sea turtle

*Dermochelys coriacea*

![Leatherback sea turtle](Photo courtesy of Blair Witherington, FWC)

**Taxonomic Classification**

Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Chordata  
Class: Chelonia  
Order: Testudines  
Family: Dermochelyidae  
Genus/Species: *Dermochelys coriacea*  
Common Name: Leatherback sea turtle

**Listing Status**

Federal Status: Endangered  
FL Status: Federally-designated Endangered  
FNAI Ranks: G3/S2 (Globally: Rare/State: Imperiled)  
IUCN Status: CR (Critically Endangered)

**Physical Description**

The leatherback sea turtle is black with blue, pink, and white splotches throughout the body. Unlike other sea turtles with hard shells, the leatherback sea turtle has a shell comprised of a thick layer of fatty tissue overlayed with a mosaic of tiny bones, and covered with a thin layer of skin. Leatherbacks average six feet (1.8 meters) in length and a weight range of 500 to 1,500
pounds (226.8-680.4 kilograms) (Stewart and Johnson 2006). The leatherback sea turtle is the largest turtle in the world (NMFS and USFWS 1992)

**Life History**

The leatherback’s diet primarily consists of jellyfish and salps (sac-like filter feeders).

Nesting occurs on sandy beaches from late February and peaks in May; however, nests have been found as late as August (Stewart and Johnson 2006). Females will come onshore and dig a body pit and a nest chamber at the bottom of the pit. They typically construct their nests at night. The average clutch size is 73 yolked eggs and 25 yolkless eggs, also called “spacers”. The purpose of the spacers is unclear. The incubation period is 59-75 days, with the hatchlings migrating to the ocean at night. The age of sexual maturity is poorly understood for this species (Stewart and Johnson 2006).

**Habitat & Distribution**

Leatherbacks can be found in marine waters throughout the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. They also nest on sandy beaches in the same range. Nesting in the United States usually occurs in Florida, Puerto Rico and St. Croix (U.S. Virgin Islands).

**Threats**

The leatherback sea turtle faces many threats both on land and in the water. The main threat to leatherbacks at sea is entanglement in fishing gear such as longlines, monofilament fishing line, nets, and crab trap lines (Stewart and Johnson 2006). When entangled in marine debris, the leatherback cannot escape and will usually drown.

Leatherbacks are also harvested illegally for their meat and eggs in some countries. On land, increased beach development is an ongoing threat for sea turtles as the development can cause degradation of the habitat, and limit the amount of nesting sites available for the leatherback. Coastal development also increases artificial lighting which can be detrimental to hatchlings causing them to migrate towards the light instead of the ocean. Other threats include increased predation on eggs, habitat degradation by pollutants and contaminants, and hits by watercraft.

**Conservation & Management**

The leatherback sea turtle is protected as an Endangered species by the Federal Endangered Species Act and as a Federally-designated Endangered species by Florida’s Endangered and
Threatened Species Rule, and by Florida's Marine Turtle Protection Act (379.2431, Florida Statutes).

Florida Statutes (F.A.C. Rule 68E-1) restrict the take, possession, disturbance, mutilation, destruction, selling, transference, molestation, and harassment of marine turtles, nests or eggs. Protection is also afforded to marine turtle habitat. A specific authorization from Commission staff is required to conduct scientific, conservation, or educational activities that directly involve marine turtles in or collected from Florida, their nests, hatchlings or parts thereof, regardless of applicant's possession of any federal permit.

-Federal Recovery Plan

Other Informative Links

Florida Natural Areas Inventory
FWC Sea Turtle Page
FWC Artificial Light Information
FWC Leatherback Nesting In Florida
International Union for Conservation of Nature
National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Species Profile
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Factsheet

References
