



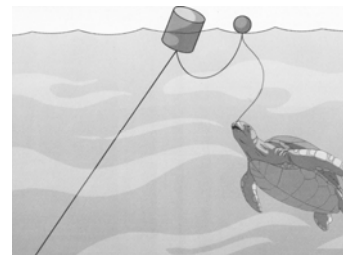
## Endangered! Mediterranean Sea Turtles

There are two main threats to the survival of the sea turtles. The first is the disruption to the beaches where the turtles come to nest, and the second is the accidental catching of turtles by fishermen. Both factors are especially apparent in the Mediterranean. Fishing is, of course, common throughout the Mediterranean, and often the beaches, where tourists delight in spending their hard earned and much deserved vacations, are the same beaches where these marine reptiles need to come ashore at night to lay their eggs in the sand.

**Of the seven species in the world, two nest in the Mediterranean: the greens (*Chelonia mydas*) and the loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*). Of the former, there are only about 500 to 800 mature adults left – the result of intense exploitation – for food, oil, and artefacts - in the 1950s and 1960s.**

Sea turtles have lungs not gills, and have to surface at regular intervals to breathe. They feed principally on sponges, small fish, molluscs, and squid, and browse the sea grass beds. Many of them are caught up in active, or discarded, fishing gear.

Trapped in a fishing net, the turtle is unable to surface in order to breath, and will quickly drown. Caught on a hook, it is dragged to the boat where either the line is cut, leaving the creature to escape with a hook embedded in its gullet, or it is killed, or maimed, by the fisherman for spoiling his nets. Tens of thousands are caught or killed each year through interaction with fisheries in the Mediterranean. It is not known how many of these survive.

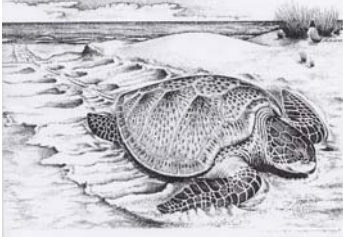


Sea turtles can migrate thousands of miles across seas and oceans to nest, and feed. Fitted with radio transmitters, their movements have been monitored by overhead satellites.



Even when the turtles do manage to reach the sandy shore and lay their eggs, their potential offspring are still not safe. Most beaches will, during a season, also accommodate hundreds, even thousands, of tourists who may unknowingly affect incubation of the eggs or destroy nests or prevent hatchlings from reaching the sea, by spreading towels, setting up umbrellas, playing games, making sand castles and riding horses.

Sea turtles are biologically programmed to return to the same beach where they were hatched to lay their own eggs 15 to 50 years later. Imagine having to return to find yourself in the middle of the grounds of an industrial complex, or under a sunbed, while at the same time battered and confused by the noise from discos, or distracted by the lights that will also attract the hatchlings away from the sea where they will perish with the sunrise. Small wonder that many females, rather than face the trauma of a trip ashore, abort their eggs on the sea floor where they rot.



Turtles may even have to swim through raw sewage or oil slick to return to their point of origin or, as has happened through a sea turned red by the spill of toxic waste from a nearby Soda Chrome factory. This is one of the most important nesting beaches for the green turtles. Often they emerge from the sea at night encrusted with the residue discharged by the factory, looking like ghostly white apparitions. While resting on the surface of the water to recover their strength between

exhaustive nesting expeditions, they have to run the gauntlet of lethal speedboat propellers, and buzzing jet-skis.

While it is illegal to kill turtles, in some parts of the Mediterranean they are still eaten as food. Until recently, sea turtles were openly butchered and sold in the fish market of Alexandria in Egypt. Action by MEDASSET in collaboration with the Friends of the Environment of Alexandria, have successfully reduced this trade, but it continues occasionally underground.

There can be no future for the sea turtles unless human beings are prepared to think considerately and act generously. In the words of Dr Karen Eckert:

**“Regardless of the regulatory framework, sea turtles live or die every day as a result of decisions made by fishermen, coastal landowners, and others that encounter them. In order for a sea turtle to live another day, the person who encounters it has to live in a world where it makes sense to watch 100 lb of meat swim away.”**



**MEDASSET–MEDITERRANEAN ASSOCIATION TO SAVE THE SEA TURTLES\***

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\* **MEDASSET, the Mediterranean Association to Save the Sea Turtles**, is an International Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) founded in 1988, and officially registered in 1993 that works exclusively on the conservation of sea turtles throughout the Mediterranean Sea. Its aims are to conserve and protect the remaining sea turtles populations in the Mediterranean and their Marine Ecosystems, through scientific research programmes, education, political liaison, publicity, and through fund-raising. The organisation has played a significant role in the constitution of the legal framework for the protection of sea turtles in the Mediterranean, especially in Greece. MEDASSET encourages public understanding and knowledge of sea turtles in the Mediterranean through exhibitions, regular appearances in the National and International Press and Media, thousands of printed documents disseminated worldwide, and by lectures at Universities, Colleges, schools, etc.