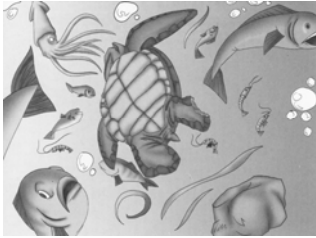


Endangered Sea Turtles in the Mediterranean

Sea turtles date back to the age of the Dinosaurs. Unlike tortoises, sea turtles cannot retrieve their head and flippers into their shells to protect themselves from predators. Having lungs, not gills, they have to surface at regular intervals in order to breathe. They feed on sponges, small fish, mollusks, squid, or browse the sea grass beds and nest on sandy beaches.



It is a special feature of turtles that they span ecosystems, from life in the deep oceans through enclosed seas, lagoons and estuaries to the use of littoral areas for nesting. They interact in different ways with such diverse creatures as whales and seals, jackals, foxes and crabs, sponges, corals, shellfish and human beings, albatross and sharks!

These ancient reptiles can migrate thousands of miles across seas and oceans to nest, feed, or spend the winter. Because very little is known about their life at sea, some turtles have been fitted with radio transmitters to be tracked by satellite to monitor their movements in the sea.

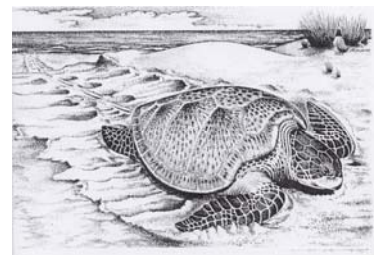
Each female comes ashore to nest two to four times in the summer, usually every three years. The baby turtles that hatch will return when mature 25 to 30 years later, to the same beach on which they were born to lay their own eggs and thus continue the cycle of life which has kept these ancient sea creatures surviving in almost their present form for over one hundred million years.

Of seven species of sea turtles in the world, two nest in the Mediterranean: the green (*Chelonia mydas*) and the loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*). Occasionally, the huge leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) can be seen in the waters of the Mediterranean. Sadly, only 300-500 mature female adult green turtles remain in the Mediterranean after intensive exploitation for food, artifacts, and oil in the 1950's and 1960's.

Although expert opinions differ, most agree that the two main threats to the survival of these species in the Mediterranean are human impact on their nesting beaches and being accidentally caught by fishermen. Trapped in a fishing net or caught on longlines, they are unable to reach the surface to breathe and quickly drown. Tens of thousands are caught each year by indiscriminate fishing, their survival unknown.

In certain parts of the Mediterranean some turtles are still illegally taken ashore destined for the cooking pot.

Often, the very same beaches where each summer, tourists delight in spending their hard earned and well deserved vacations, are the beaches where these charismatic migratory reptiles need to come ashore at night to lay their eggs in a hole 40 centimeters deep that they dig in the sand to lay about 80-100 soft shelled "ping pong" ball sized eggs. After about two months of incubation, the hatchlings emerge from the nest and instinctively rush to the sea, which they see as the bright line on the horizon. They can easily be disorientated if there are bright artificial lights shining onto the beach from bars, hotels, roads, or from other developments. They face natural predation by crabs, foxes, seabirds, and fish. It is no wonder that only an estimated one in 1,000 hatchlings reaches the age to reproduce!



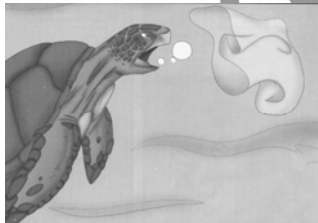
Imagine 5,000 or more tourists sharing the beach where the eggs lie incubating beneath the surface of the warm sand. There are beach games, vehicles, horse riding, sand castle building, thousands of footprints, pollution and sand removed from the dunes and nesting beach for building purposes has been recorded as containing sea turtle eggs.



Sand compaction (e.g. vehicles and heavy footprints) prevents turtles from digging nests and keeps hatchlings trapped in the nests. Shadows from towels, beach furniture, and umbrellas over the nests affect temperatures and subsequently affect the sex of hatchlings (cool temperature results in mostly males, warm in mostly females). Beach furniture, umbrellas, and other obstructions also prevent adult female turtles from nesting.

Sea turtles need an undisturbed and quiet beach at night in order to nest. Many females, rather than face the trauma of a trip ashore on a disturbed beach, abort their eggs in the sea where they rot on the sea floor...

Between exhaustive one to two hour nesting sessions, they rest on the surface of the water to recover their strength, facing a great risk from lethal speedboat propellers and buzzing jet-skis. Many turtles have been maimed or killed in this way.



Land and sea borne small garbage (e.g. plastic wrappings) can be ingested by sea turtles in mistake for food, often leading to their death by choking, starvation or internal injury.

Despite extensive research, publicity, and an increased public concern for their conservation, sea turtles, especially greens, remain under serious threat of extinction in the Mediterranean. Lack of enforcement of national and international laws, conventions, and European Community directives is largely due to ignorance and indifference on the part of individuals, policy makers, and authorities. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play an important role in sea turtle conservation throughout the Mediterranean through research, public awareness, and environmental education projects. But unless politicians accept a "political will" brought about by public pressure, sea turtle conservation in the Mediterranean will remain a dream, or a nightmare, depending on the way you choose to view it.

For more information, please visit <http://www.euroturtle.org>



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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 Turtle population 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.