

Black Sea Turtle

Chelonia agassizii



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Picture

English - Black turtle; Eastern Pacific Green

French - Tortue verte du Pacifique;

Spanish - Tortuga prieta

• **Classification:** Some authors do not recognise *Chelonia agassizii* as a species separate from *Chelonia mydas* but as a subspecies, *Chelonia mydas agassizii*

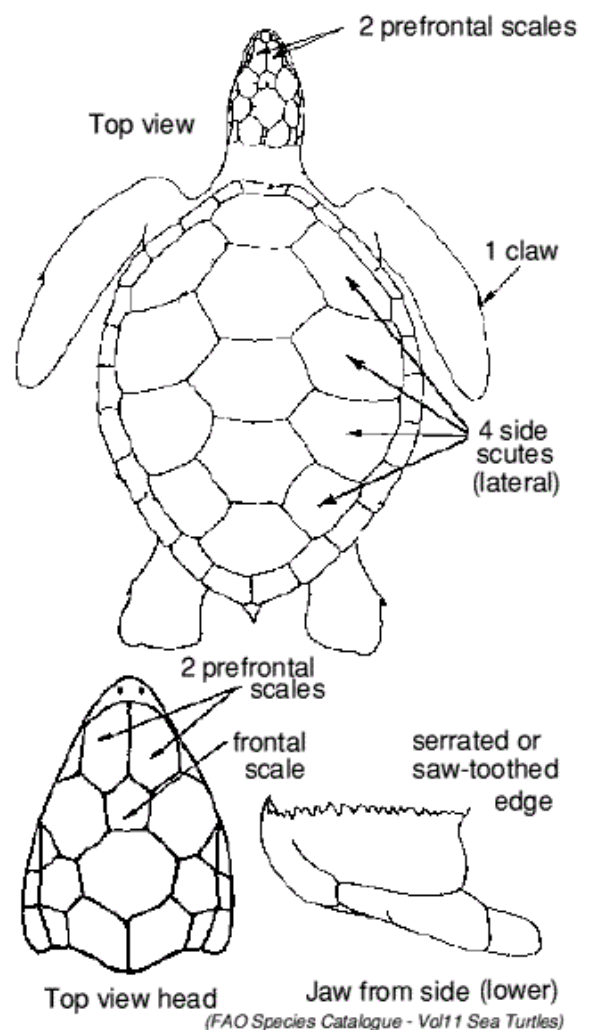


Size and Body Mass

- Females (nesting grounds) mean 41.6 kg
- Males 55.8 kg
- Length ccl. nesting females mean 72cm (65 - 117cm)
- Males (on feeding grounds) 80cm (60 -95cm)

Diagnostic Features

- Medium sized turtles : smaller than *Chelonia mydas*
- Carapace : subcardiform, more strongly vaulted and relatively narrower than that of *Chelonia mydas*. Slightly emarginate over neck and fore flippers, deeper emarginate over the rear flippers
- Colours:Dark, slate grey, blotched with olive and brown, with or without radiating yellow stripes. Underneath (plastron): grey to bluish or yellowish-grey
- Head:Small and blunt : single pair of scales in front of the eyes;
- Mandibles covered by horny tomium with sharp cutting edges: lower jaw strongly serrated.



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Geographical Distribution

West Coast of America : California to Southern Peru

Habitat and Biology



illustration: M. Demma ©
ICRAM

Typical habitats:

- Coastal waters, graze over shallow sandy flats.
- Sleeping shelters behind rocks or corals.

Migrations:

- Sometimes swim North and South from the breeding grounds of Mexico, El Salvador and Galapagos.

Nesting areas:

- Where *Chelonia agassizii* shares beaches with *Lepidochelys olivacea* and *Dermochelys coriacea*, it nests after the first and before the second.
- It also nests higher above the high tide line.

Nesting periods:

- Season shifts in time with latitude.
- In the North - October to November
- In the South (Galapagos Islands) - February to March.



illustration: M. Demma © ICRAM

Nesting behaviour:

- Females show high fidelity to a nesting site, returning close to their first nest in subsequent emergences and years.

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Egg number, size and weight:

- There is a difference between Northern and Southern populations.
- On Michoacan (North), a female may lay 1 - 8 clutches per season (mean 2.8 per female) every 1, 2 or 3 years (mean 2.2 years): Clutch size - mean 70, (38 - 139 eggs).
- In the Galapagos (South), a female may lay 1 - 5 clutches per season; (mean 1.4 per female) every 2 to 5 years (mean 3.5 years): Clutch size - mean 81 (56 - 152 eggs).
- Egg size: mean diameter 41.6 mm (36.9 - 48 mm)



illustration: M. Demma ©
ICRAM

Size and weight of hatchlings:

- No data

Incubation time:

- Incubation time : 46 - 62 days (temperature dependent)



illustration: M. Demma ©
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Maturity:

- Maturity at around 8 - 9 years



illustration: M. Demma ©
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Courtship and Mating:

- Courtship: reports from 1976-79 describe mating pairs accompanied by up to a dozen other males.
- In recent years male numbers have fallen probably because of a fishing bias towards males.

Sex determination:

- No data

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Hatchling: Hatchling mortality and predation:

- Eggs eaten by a range of predators depending on location but include pigs, dogs, ghost crabs, a burrowing beetle, *Tox suberosus* in the Galapagos and in Michoacana by scavenger flies.
- Hatchlings eaten by predators such as dogs, pigs, birds, sea snakes and fish.
- Release of scent at pipping time from the nest attracts dogs, pigs and other predators.

Commensals and disease:

- No data

Feeding:



Algae/seagrass



Molluscs



Sponges



Jellyfish

Mangrove shoots



Annelids



Tunicates

Illustrations (except second from right): M. Demma © ICRAM

- Essentially a herbivorous species, but hatchlings and juveniles feed on pelagic animals before moving inshore.
- Migrating adults feed on a wide range of invertebrates including molluscs, sponges, jellyfish, annelids and tunicates.
- Most graze on algae, sea grasses and mangrove shoots.

Threats to Survival



Accidental capture by fishing activities



Animal predation



Human predation due to meat consumption

Illustrations: M. Demma © ICRAM

- The species is still reasonably common in Central America, and is no longer fished industrially since most countries are signatories of CITES.
- Accidentally caught with Olive Ridley sea turtles in shrimping nets and shark nets.
- Still taken in traditional subsistence fisheries.
- This section is dealt with in a later section under threats.

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