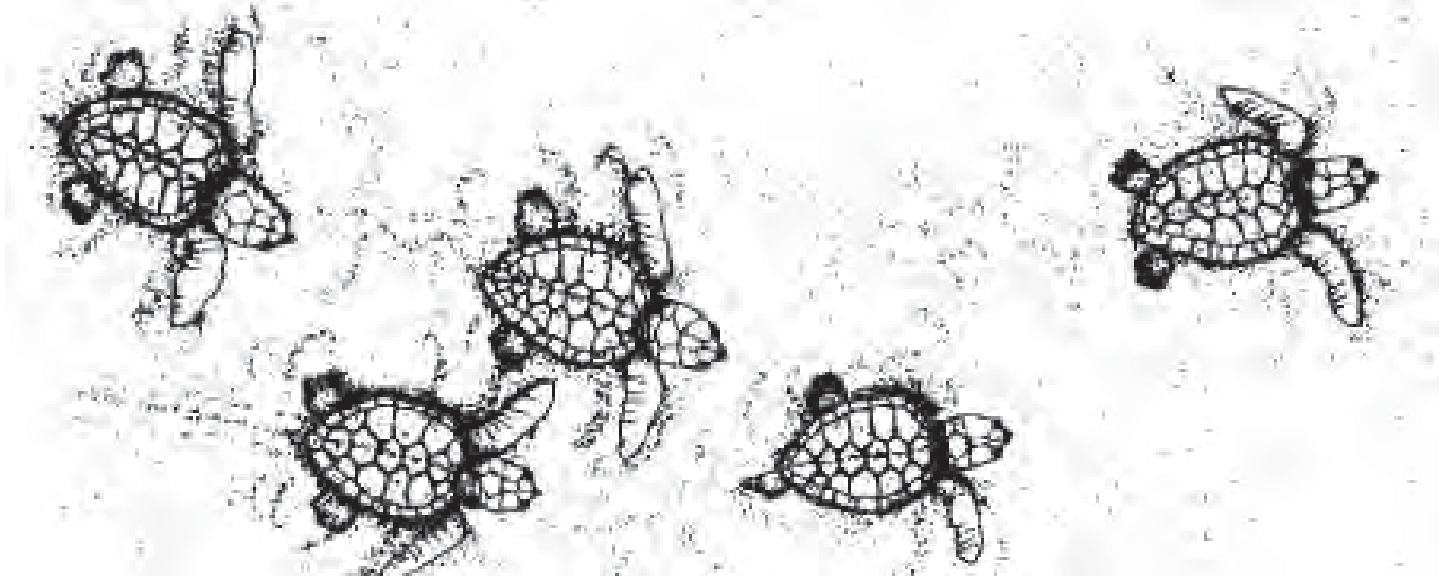




Sea Turtles



The pristine undeveloped beaches of Cape Lookout National Seashore provide an ideal nesting site to many sea turtles each year. Although they spend most of their lives in the ocean and typically nest and hatch under the cover of darkness, once in a while people can catch a glimpse of these magnificent reptiles swimming in the sound or nesting and hatching on the shore. These sightings are reminders of the perseverance of nature and the incredible creatures of the sea.

The Turtles of Cape Lookout

Cape Lookout National Seashore serves as a nesting site for four threatened and endangered species of sea turtles.

The turtles that regularly visit Cape Lookout and use the park for nesting grounds are the Loggerhead (*Carretta caretta*) sea turtles. From 1990 to 2010, Cape Lookout National Seashore had an average of 129 sea turtle nests and most of these were Loggerheads.

There are two other species of sea turtles, Green (*Chelonia mydas*) and Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) sea turtles, that occasionally nest in the park. Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempi*) sea turtles are rare visitors to the park.

The Loggerhead sea turtle comes in all sizes from sub-adults weighing fifty pounds to enormous three hundred pound barnacle encrusted adults.

Nests and Hatchlings

In May and June, visitors may see the loggerheads mating in the bight area of Cape Lookout. Shortly after the mating season, the female turtle will come ashore in the early morning hours to lay her eggs.

The female will crawl ashore and begin the nesting process. Using her strong back flippers, she digs a hole about 18 inches to 24 inches deep. She then will lay her eggs. The loggerhead can lay anywhere from 80 to 150 eggs in one nest. After laying her eggs the turtle will cover her nest with sand. She then starts her trek back to the ocean. A female sea turtle can lay up to eight nests in one year, but will typically nest only once every three years.

A sea turtle's egg is about the size of a golf ball. Unlike chicken eggs which have a hard shell, sea turtle eggs are soft.

Sea turtle nests can be destroyed by off-

road vehicles that pack the sand around the egg chamber and by animals such as raccoons and ghost crabs.

When the eggs hatch, the young two-inch long turtles have to dig their way out of the sandy nest and then begin their journey to the ocean.

The journey to the ocean is filled with many perils such as sea gulls, ghost crabs, and other predators that like to prey on the turtles.



Life in the Sea

The turtle is supremely adapted to life in the water. After the hatchlings make their way to the ocean, they will spend most of their lives in the sea. The female sea turtle will return to the beach only to lay her eggs.

Even after reaching the haven of the sea, the hatchling sea turtles survival remains in jeopardy. They must grow quickly and avoid predators on their way to the relative safety of the Sargasso Sea.

Only 1 in 1000 eggs make it to maturity.

Many female sea turtles return to where they were born, their natal beach, to lay their nests. How the turtle does that is a mystery to scientists.

Sea turtles are capable of detecting the magnetic fields of the Earth and adult females may use variations in the magnetic field to find their way to their natal beach. They may also use visual cues and may be able to recognize the chemical composition of the sand on various beaches. This question may be answered with more research and study about the turtles.

Nesting in the Park

During the summer months at Cape Lookout National Seashore, visitors may encounter roped-off sections of the beach. These areas are turtle enclosures and some contain relocated turtle nests. If a sea turtle lays her nest where waves and tides can affect it, chances are that the nest may be destroyed.

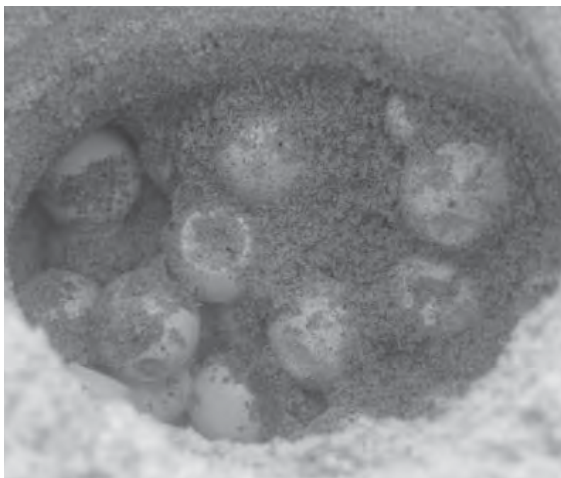
Cape Lookout staff patrol the beach daily looking for the signs of turtle crawls and digs. If the nest appears endangered or threatened, the patrol staff will move it to the enclosed area.

The enclosed areas also do not have vehicle tracks that can be hazardous to the turtles.

These tracks pose a particular obstacle to the emerging hatchlings. To a hatchling trapped in a vehicle track, the walls of sand may be an insurmountable barrier and predators can catch hatchlings trapped in tire tracks.

If a turtle gets caught in the track, they may not be able to crawl out and will die. Prohibiting vehicles inside the enclosures reduces the number of tracks in which the turtles can get caught.

Staff members also protect sea turtle nests with metal enclosures used to prevent predators from digging up the nests and eating the eggs.



Sea turtle eggs in a nest.



Crawl tracks leading to a nest (bottom)

You Can Help!

Occasionally, sea turtles may be injured or killed and they will sometimes wash ashore. Information about these strandings is vital to understanding how to protect their population.

If you encounter an injured turtle on the beach, immediately call authorities. Stay away from the turtle's head: they have powerful jaws used to crush the shells of crabs and whelks, and you could lose a finger!

Report dead turtles found on the beach. (Previously reported strandings will have brightly colored paint sprayed on the shell.)

Remember: It is against the law to remove any part of the turtle.

Visitors can help sea turtles by not throwing plastic bags in the water. Plastic bags when in the water look like Portuguese man-of-war. Jellyfish is a favorite food of the turtle. Since turtles have poor eyesight, they can mistake the plastic bags for jellyfish and eat the bag.

The plastic can harm the turtle and actually kill them. The plastic may get caught in their stomach and not be digested. It gives the turtle the feeling that they are full and they will not eat. Eventually the sea turtle will starve to death!

So if you have plastic bags, balloons or other items, please remember to throw them in the garbage and help protect the sea turtles.