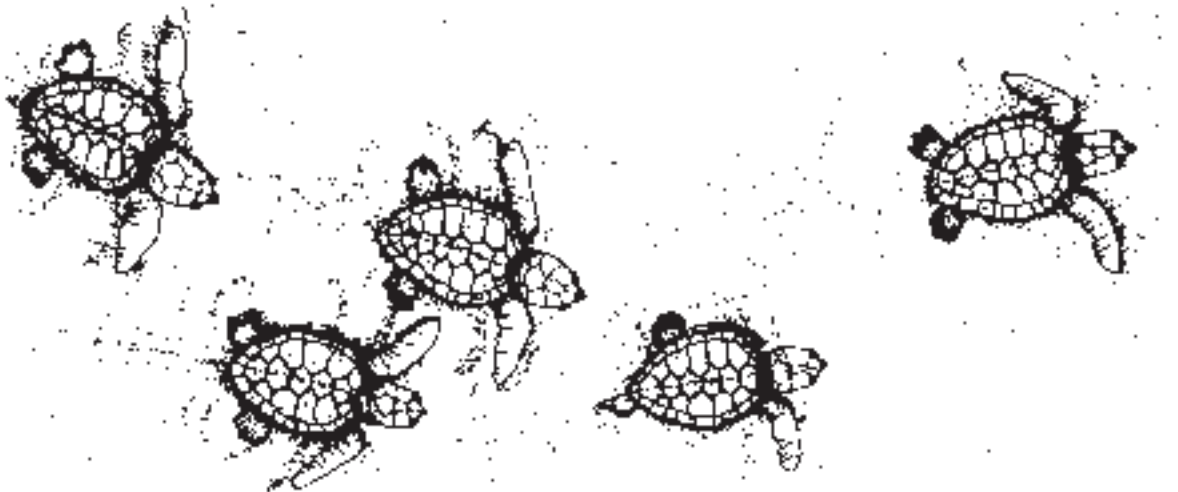


Cape Lookout

National Seashore
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sea Turtles



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

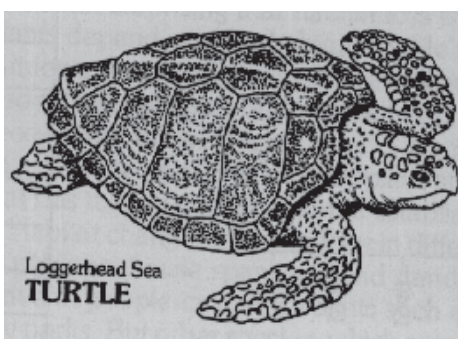
The turtles that regularly visit Cape Lookout and use the park for nesting grounds are the Loggerhead (*Carretta caretta*) and Green (*Chelonia mydas*) sea turtles.

There are two other species of sea turtles that are rare visitors to the

the park, Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempfi*) and Leather-Back (*Dermochelys coriacea*) sea turtles.

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

The Green sea turtle is somewhat smaller than the Loggerhead. A full grown adult weighs about 150 pounds.



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 backflippers, she digs a hole about 18" to 24" inches deep. She then will lay her eggs. The loggerhead can lay anywhere from 80 to 120 eggs. After laying her eggs the turtle will cover her nest with sand. She then starts her trek back to the ocean.

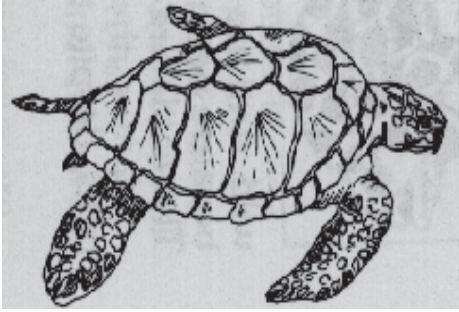
A sea turtle's egg is about the size of a golf ball. Unlike chicken's eggs which have a hard shell, sea turtle eggs are soft.

Sea turtle nests can be destroyed by off-road vehicles that pack the sand around the egg chamber and by animals such as racoons and ghost crabs.

When the eggs hatch, the young three-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.



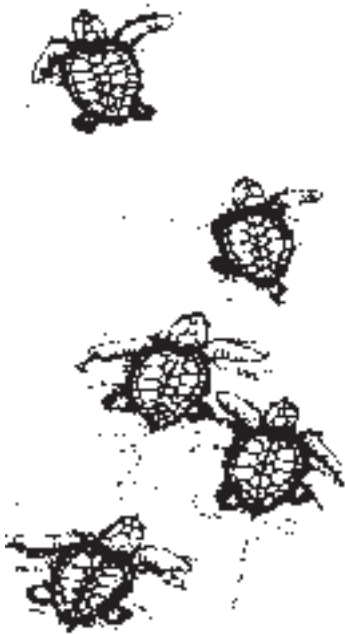


The turtle is supremely adapted to life in the water. After the hatchlings make their way to the ocean, they will spend most of their lives in the sea. The female sea turtle will return to the beach only to lay her eggs.

Even after reaching the haven of the sea, the hatchling sea turtles survival remains in jeopardy. Only 1 in 1000 hatchlings make it to adulthood.

It is thought that the female turtles, once they reach mating age, will return to where they were born to lay their nests. How the turtle does that is a mystery to scientists.

The female turtle may return to the place where she hatched by using her sense of smell. They may imprint on the smell of the sand in their nest and use that as their roadmap to return to lay their own nests. This question may be answered with more research and study about the turtles.



During the summer months at Cape Lookout National Seashore, visitors may encounter roped-off sections of the beach. These areas are turtle enclosures and contain relocated turtle egg 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 perform "turtle patrols." They 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.

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.



Occasionally sea turtles may be injured or killed, and they will sometimes wash ashore. Information about these strandings is vital to understand 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, 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.)

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 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.

