



ELDERS OF THE OCEANS



Species Name

THE ancestors of marine turtles date as far back to 130 million years ago during the Cretaceous period, when dinosaurs were walking the Earth. Since then, they have changed very little. Turtles have kept many of their ancestors' characteristics, such as the outer shell (known as a carapace), their beak-like jaw and legs that are modified into flippers. During normal activity, turtles need to surface every four or five minutes, but they can also rest or sleep underwater for several hours at a time!

Today, there are seven known species of sea turtle and six of these can be found in the Coral Triangle – the area of tropical water found between Indonesia,

Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste. The most common species you are likely to see are the green turtle and the hawksbill turtle.

Life Underwater

Sea turtles remain in the sea for most of their lives, except for adult female turtles that come ashore to lay eggs. They do this every four to five years once they have reached maturity. The females crawl up the beach at night, dig a nest and lay 80 to 200 eggs the size of ping-pong balls. The eggs are leathery and elastic so they don't break as they fall into the nest. These are then covered up with sand and left to hatch. After they



hatch, the baby turtles have to take care of themselves. The parents do not look after the hatchlings, unlike some other reptiles such as alligators.

The hatchlings usually crawl out of the nest at night, when they are safer from predators such as seagulls. However, their journey to the sea is very tough because dogs, wild pigs and seabirds all hunt them; even ants and crabs will try to make a meal of them! Also, the newborns are only the size of a biscuit, so small obstacles such as footprints become huge sand mountains and valleys to them. The baby turtles are strongly attracted to light and aim for the brightest part of the horizon, which will lead them to the sea. Usually the light from the moon and stars guides them, but often they get confused by **artificial** lights from buildings near the beaches. Because of these hazards, as well as the dangers they face once they make it to the ocean, only a very few hatchlings make it to adulthood.

After they survive that mad dash to the ocean, the hatchlings spend the rest of their lives in the open sea. They mature after about 15 to 30 years, depending on what species they are. Mature females return to the same area where they were born to lay their own eggs. These turtles will have travelled hundreds of kilometres around the oceans before they return, so it is an amazing feat of navigation and memory for turtles to return to the same area after so many years.



Species Name



Save the Turtles

It is thought that turtles can live to between 75 and 100 years old. However, there are many human activities that currently threaten them.

Many turtles get unintentionally caught and drown in fishing nets. (See page 44 to learn more about the hazards of trawl fishing.) Building development on beaches take up a lot of the available sites female turtles need to lay their eggs. Buying and selling of turtle meat, eggs, shells and other parts is still big business. Finally, some turtles can mistake plastic bags for jellyfish, which is one of their favourite foods. In fact, many plastics floating in the oceans get covered with barnacles and seaweed, which the turtles eat, only to be left with the undigested plastic in their stomachs. The plastic stays in the turtle's stomach, slowly killing it.

Some conservation groups are working hard to build awareness of these issues. Some have been set up to try and help increase the number of hatchlings that make it to the sea. Turtle eggs are gathered after the turtle has laid them and are placed in safe nests and then released.

Here's what you can do to help the turtles:

- Do not buy tourist souvenirs made from turtles or turtle parts, such as the shell.
- Do not eat turtle meat or eggs.
- Avoid littering, especially on beaches and around the sea. Cut down on the amount of plastic you use.
- Spread the word about these issues that threaten turtles. **AGJ**

PSST!
ADEX, the dive show by sister magazine Asian Diver, is coming up in April, and it's dedicated to turtles! Turn to page 50 for more details!

