

Turtle Love

by Brian Geasa



Turtle season in Baja is from mid-July to mid-December...

Female Turtles lay eggs just above the high water mark on the beach – near the base of the dune. During this period, you may see many marked turtle nests on the beach. Remember, there are unmarked turtle nests as well. The young turtles hatch after 50 to 60 days, from mid-September thru mid-December.

The newly hatched turtles face many difficulties making their way to the water:

- Both the adults and newly hatched turtles are attracted to artificial lighting, sending them in the wrong direction. Turn off all unnecessary lighting at night. Use motion sensors for outdoor safety and landscaping lighting.
- The females have a hard time digging nests in sand that has been packed down by vehicle traffic. The young need a relatively smooth path to the beach and easily get stuck in the ruts from tires. They are forced to crawl parallel to the beach till exhausted and are easy target for birds. Large vehicles are worse than the quads as they make deeper ruts and pack down the sand more. *If you must drive on the beach, drive as close to the water line as practical.*
- Turtles are sometimes ensnared in abandoned fishing line and netting. Do not throw tangled fishing line overboard, dispose of it properly and clean up any you might find.
- Turtles feed on jellyfish and often confuse plastics for food – which quickly kills them. Minimize use of plastic bags and clean up all plastics on the beach and in the arroyos.

Turtle Q & A

How many species of Sea Turtles inhabit Baja California?

Five out of seven of the world's sea turtle species (all listed as endangered or threatened) inhabit the waters surrounding the Baja California Sur.

Eastern Pacific Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)

Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

Leatherback, (*Dermochelys coriacea*)

Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*)

Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*)

Do hatchlings need a full moon to find the ocean after they emerge from their nests?

This is a myth. Hatchlings emerge from their nests at all phases of the moon and successfully find the ocean.

How many nests does each female sea turtle lay?

Females nest every two to three years, laying several nests on sandy beaches. After digging a hole and depositing about 80–120 eggs, she fills in the hole with sand and camouflages the nest and returns to the sea.

How do hatchlings know the direction of the ocean when they emerge from their nests?

Sea turtles are born with the instinct to move toward the brightest direction. On a natural beach, this direction is the light of the open horizon. Artificial light can confuse them.

How long do sea turtles live?

Sea turtles can live 40 to 60 years or more.

How much do sea turtles weigh?

Sea turtles range in size from the 75–100 pound Kemp's Ridley to the 1,300 pound, 8-foot-long leatherback.

What do the hatchlings do after they leave their nests?

After the two-month incubation period, the turtle hatchlings all dig out of their nest around the same time, a process that can take several days. As a group, they then leave their nest at night and head directly for the sea.

This first trek "imprints" their home beach into the hatchlings. Once grown, the turtles will return to lay their nests on the same beach.

What is a hatchling's chance of survival?

Only about one in 1,000 turtles survive to adulthood. Hatchlings die of dehydration if they don't make it to the ocean fast enough. Birds, crabs, and other animals also prey on the young turtles.

What should I do if I find sea turtle hatchlings on the beach?

- Watch from a distance & Leave them in their nest.
- Keep all lights off.
- Allow them to crawl to the water on their own, unless trapped or disoriented.
- If you must assist a hatchling, place it on the beach well above the water line – not in the water.

What should I do if I see a sea turtle nesting?

- Stay behind her at a distance and remain quiet.
- Don't use any lights, including flashlights, flash photography, and video equipment.
- Don't put your hands on or near the turtle. Any distractions may frighten and disorient her, causing her to return to the ocean before completely covering and camouflaging her nest.

What threats do the turtles face?

- Fishing Industries - Sea turtles are unintentionally caught as bycatch in gill nets, long lines, and trawls not equipped with turtle exclusion devices.
- Hunting - Even though it has been illegal in Mexico since 1990, a scientific study estimated that over 35,000 sea turtles are consumed by humans in Baja California each year.
- Pollution – Plastic bags mimic one of some turtles main diet, jelly fish. Pesticides, fertilizers, and household products stress the turtle causing disease.
- Habitat Destruction – All the new developments along the Baja peninsula are built on the same beautiful beaches that the turtles use for nesting.