

# Stamps show many species of sea turtles

Seven species of sea turtles live in temperate and tropical oceans around the world. They are all threatened or endangered species, primarily

## Topics and Themes

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due to over-harvesting of both eggs and adult turtles, loss of nesting habitat and entrapment in nets and trawls.

Every sea turtle begins its

instinctive digging behavior of the hatchlings gradually lifts them to the surface. There they wait until sand-cooling darkness falls before rapidly crawling from the nest and scrambling to the ocean, which they can detect by wavelengths of light even if they cannot see the water.

The emergence of the sea turtle hatchlings is shown on Seychelles Scott 638 and 639 (Figure 1), a pair of stamps from a strip of four issued in 1988.

Most of the males will never again return to land. The females will only return

It is believed that the young turtles then spend several years feeding in seaweed mats found in current convergence zones before most species migrate back to inshore areas to spend the remainder of their lives.

It is not known for certain how long it takes for sea turtles to reach maturity, but it is estimated at from 20 to 60 years, depending on the species and environmental considerations. Only 1 in 10,000 hatchlings survive to adulthood.

When the time comes for the adult turtle to lay her eggs, she returns to her natal beach area, lingers just offshore until darkness falls, then slowly and ponderously drags herself out of the water and up the beach.

Dominica Scott 1551 shows how she then excavates a nest chamber with her hind flippers and deposits her eggs.

Afterward, she covers her nest with sand, flings sand all around to conceal her work, and, exhausted, drags herself back to the ocean until next time.

She never sees her offspring, the nest is on its own, and the cycle begins anew.

Sea turtles are found on 613 postage stamps from 121 countries, and are the main subject on 364 of these stamps, many of which depict very accurate renditions of the different species, as well as illustrating some of their behavior.

The entire life cycle of the sea turtle is depicted on Palau Scott 383, a souvenir sheet of six se-tenant stamps issued Nov. 15, 1995.

The first stamps to feature sea turtles were issued by the Cayman Islands on Dec. 5, 1932 (Scott 69-80). The 6-penny value from the set, Scott 76, is in Figure 2.

The Caymans have also issued the most stamps depicting turtles, 76 total, through 23 of these stamps show a stylized turtle in the national coat of arms. Often the turtle is barely visible to the unaided eye, though it is more clearly visible on Cayman Islands Scott 461.

Four different species of sea turtle are shown on four stamps in Figure 3.

The green turtle, *Chelonia mydas*, is shown at top left on a 51 stamp from Tokelau, Scott 219.

The green turtle is depicted on the greatest number of stamps, 187 at the time of this writing, from 67 countries. This vegetarian turtle gets its name from the color of its body fat, and has historically been the most common species harvested for food.

At top right is the hawksbill turtle, *Eretmochelys imbricata*, on Ryukyu Islands Scott 137. The hawksbill appears on 144 stamps from 57 countries. It is distinguishable from other sea turtles in that its carapace (upper shell) has serrated edges, its scutes (shell plates) overlap like



Figure 4. Sea turtles appear on cachet, cancel and stamps on this 1984 first-day cover from Papua New Guinea. The 5-toea stamp at upper right shows the flatback turtle.

shingles, and its head elongates into a beaklike mouth, hence its common name.

Hawksbill turtles have been harvested primarily for their shell, as their scutes can be worked into beautiful jewelry and other decorative items. Human desire for this "tortoise shell" continues to decimate worldwide populations of this species.

The leatherback turtle, *Dermochelys coriacea*, is featured on 64 stamps from 34 countries. This large black turtle is easy to identify: it has a ridged, leathery carapace, clearly visible on Trinidad and Tobago Scott 580, shown at lower left in Figure 3.

Leatherbacks can tolerate colder waters than can the other species, and they spend virtually all their lives in the open ocean, returning to inshore areas only to nest. As their body temperature can be maintained higher than that of the surrounding water, leatherbacks are thought to be the only reptile that can be considered warm-blooded.

The leatherback's diet consists almost exclusively of jellyfish, which has made it vulnerable to intestinal obstruction by jellyfishlike plastic bags, resulting in slow death by starvation.

The loggerhead turtle, *Caretta caretta*, is shown on 55 stamps from 40 countries. At lower right in Figure 3 is Scott 1474 from Yugoslavia, issued in 1980 as part of a four-stamp set showing various sea creatures.

The loggerhead is always reddish-brown in color and is distinguished by its large head.

Loggerheads are the most

common sea turtles found nesting in the southeastern United States. Communities in this area have endeavored to make the loggerhead's traditional nesting beaches more hospitable to them by reducing the amount and type of light visible on the beach at night during nesting season. Artificial light discourages many adult turtles from emerging onto the beach at all, and disorients hatchlings, preventing them from reaching the ocean.

Other sea turtle species depicted on stamps include the olive ridley, *Lepidochelys olivacea*, a relatively small, gray-colored turtle found on 19 stamps from 15 countries.

This species often nests in arribadas (Spanish for arrivals), large simultaneous nesting congregations. On some beaches around the world, thousands of olive ridleys suddenly emerge in waves over a period of three or four days, nest simultaneously, then disappear. No one knows for certain what brings the animals together, or where they go once they disperse.

The Kemp's ridley, *Lepidochelys kempi*, is found exclusively in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and along the eastern coast of the United States, as far north as Long Island Sound. It closely resembles the olive ridley, and also nests in arribadas.

Dominica Scott 1550 is one of six stamps from five countries depicting this species.

Kemp's ridley is the most seriously endangered of all sea turtles, as both its range and its primary diet of crusta-

ceans puts it right in the path of shrimp trawls, where it is often trapped in the net and drowned.

Laws have recently been enacted by Congress compelling trawl nets to include tor-



Figure 6. A legend from the Marshall Islands, "Lijebako Rescues her Granddaughter," is depicted on Scott 596b, from a block of four stamps issued in 1995.



Figure 7. A sea turtle appears on Kiribati Scott 437, a 1984 stamp that shows the Nikumaroro atoll.

tle excluder devices, or trawling efficiency devices (called "TEDs" for short), which enable sea turtles and other large nontarget objects like rocks and cannonball jellyfish to escape the trawl, while permitting shrimp to continue into the purse section of the net for harvest.

This and other conservation efforts have resulted in a modest increase in the number of Kemp's ridley's seen on their only nesting beach in northeastern Mexico.

The flatback turtle, *Natur depressus* (formerly *Chelonia depressa*) is pictured on 10 stamps and overprints from three countries. It is found only in the waters of northern Australia and Papua New Guinea. The flatback resembles the ridley turtles, but its carapace is flatter, with upturned edges.

Figure 4 shows a first-day cover from Papua New Guinea for the set of six sea turtle



Figure 1. Hatchling sea turtles emerge from their nest and run to the sea on Seychelles Scott 638 and 639.

life in a soft-shelled egg about 2 feet below the sands of a temperate or tropical beach, where it incubates along with its 80-150 siblings for approximately six weeks.

The hatchlings' sex is determined by the average temperature of the nest. If it has been consistently warmer than 83 degrees Fahrenheit, most will be female; if cooler, most will be male.

Most of the eggs in the nest hatch together, and the

many years later, probably to the very same beach, to lay eggs of their own.

Once in the water, the hatchlings instinctively head directly into the waves to get themselves far off shore as quickly as possible. Evidence suggests that an ability to detect magnetic fields permits them to turn toward warmer waters if currents try to carry them farther north or south than about 30 degrees latitude.



Figure 2. Green and hawksbill turtles flank the denomination on Cayman Islands Scott 76, from the first set of stamps to show sea turtles (issued Dec. 5, 1932).



Figure 3. Four varieties of sea turtles shown on stamps from four countries: the green turtle on Tokelau Scott 219, the hawksbill turtle on Ryukyu Islands Scott 137, the leatherback turtle on Trinidad and Tobago Scott 580, and the loggerhead turtle on Yugoslavia Scott 1474.



Figure 5. Along with a picture of a sea turtle on its cover, this 1995 booklet from Malaysia includes five copies each of Scott 562 and 563 depicting two different sea turtles.

stamps issued Feb. 8, 1984. The flatback is shown on Scott 592, the 3-oz stamp in the upper-right corner of the cover.

To commemorate the issue of their sea turtle stamps, several countries have sold them in decorative booklets, including the 1995 issue from Malaysia in Figure 5, which contains five copies each of Scott 562 and 563. A sea turtle is also featured as the central design of the first-day cover for that issue.

On Oct. 3, 1995, Australia issued a souvenir sheet titled "The World Down Under" (Scott 1465), which contains a stamp of a flatback hatching. This colorful item has an embossed texture and is luminescent. Shining an ultraviolet light on the sheet causes portions of the design to glow slightly when the light source is removed.

Sea turtles are found on stamps in car-tent reef scenes, as cartoons, and in the background or border of topical scenes. Marshall Islands Scott 596b (Figure 6) shows a sea turtle as part of an island legend.

Collectors of prehistoric animals on stamps will find the large extinct sea turtles arctelon or protostega on 10 stamps from eight countries.

A few years ago news reports announced that parts of Amelia Earhart's plane may have been found on Nikumaroro in the central Pacific. Collectors of maps on stamps may have recognized that location, as Kir-

bati Scott 437 (Figure 7) shows a map of Nikumaroro, along with a drawing of a hawksbill turtle.

Three countries have issued sea turtle stamps in unusual shapes. Cayman Islands has three diamond-shaped stamps (Scott 284-86). Ascension has three triangular stamps (Scott 170-72), and Tonga has three arrowhead-shaped self-adhesive stamps (Scott 446, C251 and C0152).

Stamp collectors with access to the Internet's World Wide Web can find additional information about all known sea turtle stamps, as well as scanned pictures of nearly 400 of them, at

[www.wired2.net/linnsley/](http://www.wired2.net/linnsley/) a website dedicated to "Sea Turtle Postage Stamps of the World."

Nancy Linsley is an international flight attendant. Her interest in collecting sea turtle stamps began nine years ago after finding her first stamp in Mexico while volunteering on a nest protection project. She now maintains the Sea Turtle Postage Stamps of the World site on the Internet's World Wide Web.

George Balazs heads up the National Marine Fisheries Service's Marine Turtle Research Program in Honolulu, Hawaii. He has been studying and helping to conserve sea turtles in the Pacific region for 25 years and collecting sea turtle postage stamps for nearly as long. ■

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