

## Sea Turtles – the Green, Loggerhead and Leatherback

... *Peter Crowcroft, Education Coordinator - Great Ocean Road Coast Committee*

It might seem strange to be writing an article on species that live in tropical waters far north of here. As many of you know however, we do have the occasional stranding of these massive and intriguing sea-turtles, including a mature Loggerhead in September this year.

### Leatherback Turtle – *Dermochelys coriacea*

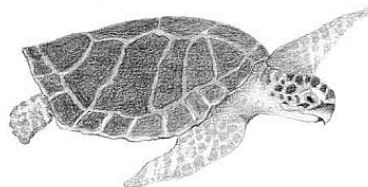
These are the most easily recognised of the large sea-turtles due to their lack of a bony carapace. Instead they are covered in a very thick leathery skin with small bony structures known as osteoderms to provide support and protection. It is the true giant of the ocean going turtles, up to 2.2m in total length, with the front flippers each growing up to 2.7m long. Adults are typically around 384kg in weight but can be double that or more. They can dive to an incredible depth, with records as far as 1,280m below the surface, in search of their favourite prey, the sea jelly. These dives typically last under 10 minutes, but they can be under the water for over 30 minutes (they breathe air, so that's a long breath hold). They are the fastest marine reptile, reaching a blistering 35km/h through the water, which they owe to their beautiful, hydrodynamic-shaped body.



Leatherback turtle

Some years ago, a relatively small one (which still required a tractor to move) washed up at the Painkalac Creek estuary mouth. All the Aireys Inlet P.S kids walked down to see it, a fantastic experience for them. Unlike the other large turtles their distribution does include all Australian coastal waters.

### Loggerhead Turtle – *Caretta caretta*

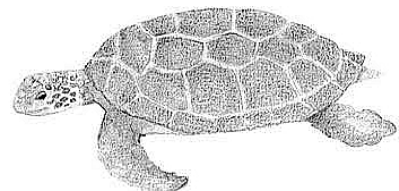


Loggerhead turtle

This was our most recent stranding, washed ashore at Step Beach in Aireys. Given how little experience we get with large turtles, my initial incorrect call that it was a Green Sea-turtle, might be forgiven. This individual had obviously been deceased for some time and, despite its rather gruesome state, still offered us a chance to later definitely ID it as *C. caretta*. This was due to the number of costal shields (plates on the carapace) down each side – Loggerheads have 5 or sometimes 6, whereas Green Turtles have just 4 shields. Aside from that I maintain that they look very similar! The question as to why it came ashore here is much more difficult to know. Carnivorous turtles do mistakenly ingest plastic instead of sea-jellies, so was this the case? Or had it just drifted on the current from warmer climes after dying peacefully at sea?

### Green Turtle – *Chelonia mydas*

The Green Turtle is the quintessential Sea-turtle, with breeding colonies on the Great Barrier Reef islands such as Heron Island. Many years ago I was fortunate enough to witness them coming ashore to lay batches of approximately 100 small, round, thin-shelled eggs. Interestingly, though carnivorous when young, the adults are believed to be almost entirely herbivorous, subsisting on marine algae and seagrasses. Their home range does not extend to the Surf Coast but does reach the far eastern Victorian Coast. It does not reach the giant size of the Leatherback, with adults typically around 150kg and 1.5m in total length and exceptionally large individuals reaching nearly 400kg.



Green turtle

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