Did you know that sea turtles are reptiles?

Sea turtles are in the Taxonomic Class of Reptilia. They share this class with crocodiles, alligators, lizards, snakes, land turtles, and tortoises. Sea turtles breathe air and are cold-blooded. These incredible animals have been around for about 110 million years and are protected by the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Five species of sea turtles are found in the Gulf of Mexico with seven species found worldwide. All species are protected but threats to their existence continue. Mammals and natural activities within the Gulf of Mexico have potential impacts to sea turtles and their surrounding habitats. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) studies protected species and their habitats in order to understand how human and natural activities impact them and their environment.

Loggerhead Turtle (Caretta caretta)

- Size: Adults may average about 36 inches in length and weigh up to 280 pounds
- Diet: Powerful jaws allow them to eat hard-shelled prey such as whelks, crabs, and clams
- Habitat: Uses 3 different ecosystems—terrestrial, oceanic, and neritic. Found in all temperate and tropical regions of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans
- Distribution: The Atlantic Coast National Wildlife Refuge is the most important nesting area for loggerhead turtles in the western hemisphere. Twenty-five percent of all nesting in the U.S. occurs at this refuge on the east coast of Florida
- Fun Facts: Named because of its relatively large head. Many cultural stories include legends that flipper the attribute to "walk" on the ocean floor. During breeding season, females have been known to travel hundreds of miles to nest without foraging. Most abundant sea turtle in U.S. coastal waters

Kemp’s Ridley Turtle (Lepidochelys kempi)

- Federal Status: ESA Endangered—throughout its range
- Size: Smallest adult marine turtle in the world, averages about 110 pounds with a length of 24-28 inches
- Diet: Adults feed in areas with sandy or muddy bottom. Diet includes mainly plants, but they also feed on sea urchins, jellyfish, and mussels
- Habitat: Neritic zones containing sandy or muddy bottoms
- Distribution: Found throughout the Gulf of Mexico and the U.S. Atlantic seacoast 95% of world’s Kemp’s Ridley nesting occurs in the state of Texas, U.S.A.
- Fun Facts: Unique characteristic of synchronized nesting called “embryonics” (“in English), where females come ashore to nest in high numbers. They nest mostly during daylight

Leatherback Turtle (Dermochelys coriacea)

- Federal Status: ESA Endangered—throughout its range
- Size: Largest adult turtle and heaviest living reptile in the world. Measures 6.5 feet in length and can weigh 2,000 pounds
- Diet: Feeds primarily on jellyfish and other soft-bodied pelagic prey; can dive to a depth of 1,100 feet in search of prey
- Habitat: Oceanic pelagics, migrating between feeding areas and nesting beaches but also forages in coastal waters
- Distribution: In the United States, nesting occurs in the U.S. Caribbean, primarily the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, and in the Gulf of Mexico. Adult leatherbacks can tolerate cooler water temperatures better than any other sea turtles
- Fun Facts: Only sea turtle that does not have a large bony shell, the leatherback is uniquely equipped with 7 ridges on the backside. Because of its large size, Leatherbacks are the most migratory and wide-ranging of all sea turtle species. Alone in the Taxonomic Family of Dermochelyidae

Green Turtle (Chelonia mydas)

- Federal Status: ESA Endangered—breeding populations in Florida and on the Pacific coast of Mexico; ESA Threatened in other populations
- Size: Largest of hard-shelled sea turtles, weighing 300-350 pounds and growing to about 3 feet in length
- Diet: Adult turtles eat only plants—primarily seagrasses and algae
- Habitat: Can be found in both marine and freshwater waters from Texas to Massachusetts, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico
- Distribution: Nesting in the U.S. occurs primarily along the central and southeast coast of Florida in about 140 colonies throughout the world in tropical and subtropical waters between 30° north and 25° south
- Fun Facts: Adults are shyly herbivorous, hatchlings feed on pelagic plants and animals. Diet gives them a greenish-colored tissue which gives them their name. Largest nesting populations can be found in Tortuguero, Costa Rica and Raine Island, Australia

Hawksbill Turtle (Eretmochelys imbricata)

- Federal Status: ESA Endangered—throughout its range
- Size: Adults average about 100-150 pounds with the shell ranging 25-35 inches in length
- Diet: Foods mainly on sponges, other invertebrates, and algae
- Habitat: Often found around healthy coral communities
- Distribution: The U.S. Hawksbill turtles are found in the Gulf of Mexico, commonly among Texas, southern Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands; generally found between 35° North and 30° South in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans
- Fun Facts: Shells of prominent map backs give turtles unique markings. But the beauty is not only in the shell. Hawksbill are known for their beauty. Day or night, hawksbill turtles use recipes and colors to create needed effects on turtle nests as well. Every night. Hawksbill turtles are renowned for their distinctive, highly colored shells

Common Characteristics: A sea turtle cannot retract its head into its shell because the muscles from the front flipper take up too much room in the shell. A sea turtle’s carapace is covered by thick skin, they have no external ear opening. They use their strong jaws to tear and crush food because they have no teeth. Sea turtles have four limb-like 4-stage flippers—hatching, juvenile, sub-adult, and adult. Juvenile turtles float on Sargassum mats and feed in the open ocean until they are young adults, when they move to nurse. They grow slowly, reaching sexual maturity between 10 and 40 years, and breed every 2-3 years. Sea turtles make long migrations between feeding and nesting grounds, and females typically nest on or near the beach where they were hatched. The sex of a sea turtle is determined by temperatures experienced during embryonic development.

Threats to sea turtles come from incidental catch from commercial and recreational fishing, ingestion of plastic and entanglement in marine debris is also a problem. There is degradation and loss of their nesting and foraging grounds. Environmental contamination can degrade habitats. Human consumption of turtle eggs and shell meat is a great threat. Artificial lighting at or near beaches can deter adult female turtles from coming ashore and laying eggs, and newly-hatched hatchlings can be misoriented away from the sea by bright overhead lights.

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For more information, contact:
1-800-526-0005
www.boem.gov

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