

LANGUISHING SPECIES: SOUTHEAST

LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE

Loggerheads, listed as threatened in 1978, were named for their relatively large heads, which support powerful jaws and enable them to feed on hard-shelled prey, such as whelks and conchs. The top shell is reddish-brown in adults and sub-adults, while the bottom shell is generally pale yellowish. Loggerheads from the Southeast grow to about 3 feet long (upper shell length) and weigh about 250 pounds.



The turtles reach sexual maturity at about 35 years old. In the Southeast, mating occurs in late March to early June, and females come to shore to lay eggs between late April and early September. They may lay three to five nests, sometimes more, during a single nesting season. The eggs hatch between late June and mid-November. Hatchlings average 1.8 inches long. They immediately head to sea. Males never return to land, and females do so only to lay eggs.

The loggerhead is found in the temperate and tropical areas of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans. The major U.S. nesting beaches are found from North Carolina through southwest Florida, with minimal nesting westward into Texas and northward into southern Virginia. Loggerhead nesting in Oman, the United States and Australia account for about 88 percent of nesting worldwide. Recent reviews indicate that only two loggerhead nesting beaches worldwide have greater than 10,000 females nesting per year: south Florida and Masirah Island in Oman.

In the southeastern U.S., about 80 percent of loggerhead nesting occurs in six Florida counties (Brevard, Indian River, St. Lucie, Martin, Palm Beach, and Broward counties). In Brevard and Indian River counties, a 20-mile section of coastline from Melbourne Beach to Wabasso Beach comprises the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, the most important nesting area for loggerhead turtles in the western hemisphere. Twenty-five percent of all U.S. loggerhead nesting occurs in the refuge, with densities of 1,000 nests per mile.

Although nesting increased in the Southeast from 1989 to 1997, it has since declined about 22 percent, with 40 percent of that decline occurring in the last seven years. The reason this is unknown, but it could have been caused by long-line fishing, by increased strandings from disease and red tides, by development along nesting beaches or by unusually stormy weather.

Loggerheads face threats both on beaches and at sea. The greatest cause of decline and the continuing primary threat to loggerhead turtle populations worldwide is incidental capture in fishing gear, primarily in long lines and gillnets but also in trawls, traps and pots, and dredges. Loggerheads also are imperiled by egg and meat hunters in many places, including the Bahamas, Cuba and Mexico.

The highly migratory behavior of loggerheads allows conservation efforts in one nation to be jeopardized by activities in another. Protecting loggerhead sea turtles on U.S. nesting beaches and in U.S. waters alone is not sufficient to ensure the continued existence of the species.

In the United States, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service share jurisdiction for marine turtles. NMFS has initiated changes in fishing regulations to make fishing less of a threat to the turtles, and the Service has taken measures to protect nesting beaches.

Funding from all government sources for loggerhead sea turtle recovery ranks the species number 30 out of 1,311 species, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fiscal year 2004 report (the most recent available) to Congress, *Federal and State Endangered and Threatened Species Expenditures*. Total loggerhead recovery funding from all government sources that year was about \$7.5 million, with \$779,000 coming from the Fish and Wildlife Service. The bulk of sea turtle recovery work is handled by the National Marine Fisheries Service.