

Student

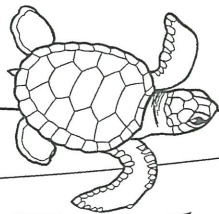
Fact Files



Australian Government

Great Barrier Reef
Marine Park Authority

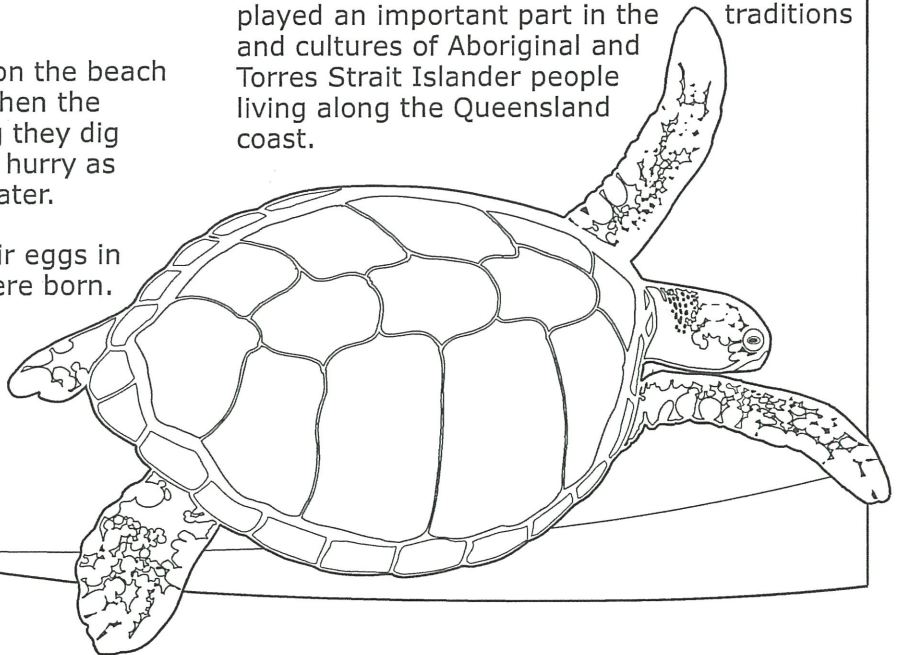
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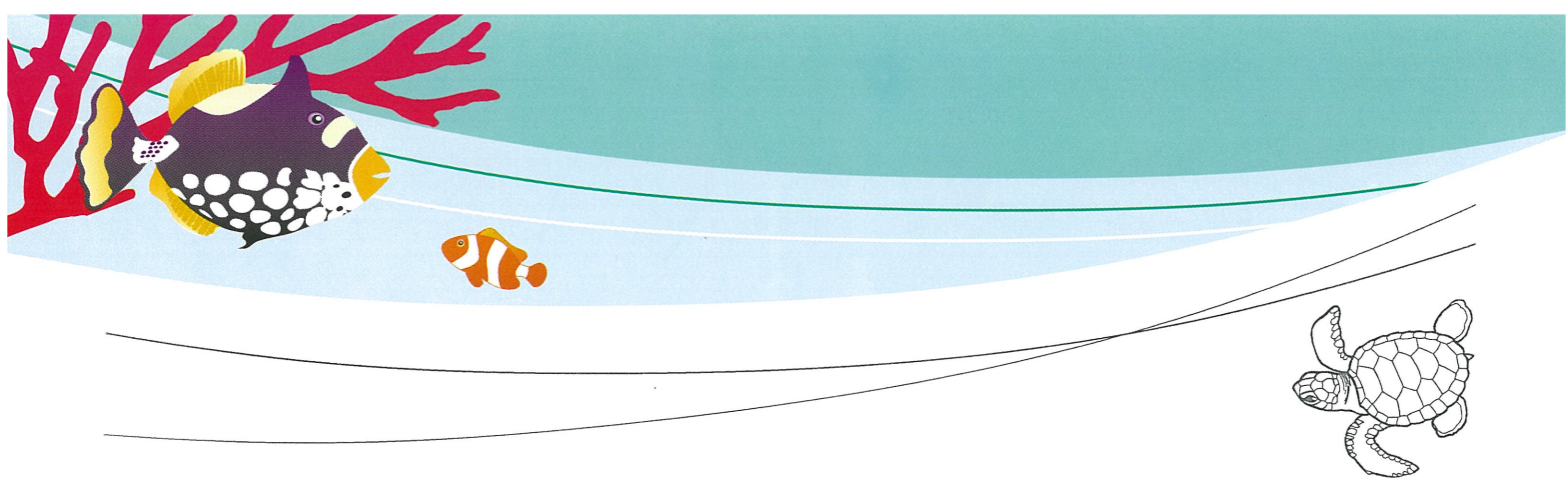
Marine Turtles

- Marine turtles have been swimming in the ocean for more than 150 million years, first appearing during the age of the dinosaur, and have changed little since then.
- Turtles are reptiles and breathe air.
- Six species of marine turtles are found in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and all six are protected species.
- Female turtles dig a nest high on the beach in which they lay their eggs. When the hatchlings emerge from the egg they dig themselves out of the sand and hurry as fast as they can down to the water.
- Marine turtles return to lay their eggs in the same region where they were born.
- A turtles' shell evolved when the spine fused and the ribs flattened, extended and joined together. It helps protect the turtle.
- Leatherback turtles feed almost exclusively on jellyfish and can dive down to depths of over 1500 metres.
- For thousands of years, marine turtles have played an important part in the traditions and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living along the Queensland coast.



our great barrier reef
let's keep it great





Marine turtles in the Great Barrier Reef

One of the highlights of a visit to the Great Barrier Reef is spotting a marine turtle. Of the seven species of marine turtles in the world, six are found in the Great Barrier Reef. Green, hawksbill, and loggerhead turtles are the most frequently sighted. Visitors to the Great Barrier Reef have also spotted flatback, leatherback, and olive ridley turtles.

Appearance

A turtle's shell is low-domed, streamlined and relatively light, which allows the turtle to glide easily through the water. The shell also protects the turtle and helps it float. Turtles swim with strong, fin-shaped front flippers, which allow it to move quickly through the water. A turtle's rear flippers enable it to steer and to dig an egg chamber. Turtles ingest large amounts of saltwater while feeding. Special glands beside the tear duct on the eye excrete the excess salt, giving the appearance of 'tears' when turtles are on land.

Breeding

Between October and February, female turtles come out of the water to nest on land and lay several clutches of eggs at fortnightly intervals. Turtle hatchlings dig their way out of nests between December and April and head straight for the water as fast as they can. Many hatchlings do not survive their first day. Some are eaten by ghost crabs, feral pigs or foxes before they even reach the water. Others are taken by gulls, fish, sharks or crocodiles. Only a small number of hatchlings, about one in 1000, get the chance to become adults.

Feeding

Different species of turtles feed on different things. Green turtles mainly eat seagrass and algae; loggerhead and olive ridley turtles eat shellfish and crustaceans; hawksbills eat algae and

sponges; and flatbacks eat sea pens, sea cucumbers and soft corals. Leatherback turtles feed on jellyfish.

Threats to survival

Turtles that survive to be adults have a long extended life cycle. Slow growing and long lived they take decades to reach maturity and start laying eggs of their own. This means their endangered populations will be slow to increase. Turtles are protected in the Great Barrier Reef, however they still face a number of threats from human activities. Fishing nets, boat strikes and litter that can entangle or be mistaken for food are all dangerous to turtles. Plastic bags can look like jellyfish in the water and if eaten, turtles can get sick or die. Marine turtles are also vulnerable to predators such as sharks and crocodiles.

Cultural significance

Marine turtles are an important element of the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living along the Great Barrier Reef. The activities associated with hunting the turtle and preparing the meat has great significance and is a long cultural tradition. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is working with Traditional Owners to assist them with managing their hunting sustainably via Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreements.

You can help protect our marine turtles

- Don't litter: even if you throw a piece of rubbish on the ground in your school, it can make its way into the ocean.
- If visiting beaches along the Great Barrier Reef between October and April, switch off or minimise the use of lights (e.g. torches) so that nesting turtles and hatchlings won't be confused.
- Keep your dog on a leash so that turtles and hatchlings won't be harmed.
- Do not chase, grab, try to ride or block the path of a turtle either in the water or on the beach.

