

Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Flatback turtle

Natator depressus

Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Northern Territory: Data Deficient

Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976

Description

The Flatback Turtle is a marine turtle with a distinctive low-domed carapace. In adults, the carapace has upturned lateral margins and is covered by a thin layer of skin. The carapace is olive, grey or pale grey-green, with an average curved length of 92 cm. The Flatback Turtle can be distinguished from other species of marine turtle by a combination of non-overlapping carapace scutes, four pairs of costal scutes, low-domed carapace, and one pair of large scales in front of and above the eyes.

Nesting Flatback Turtles move on land using both front flippers simultaneously, creating a symmetrical track in the sand. The only other marine turtle that regularly breeds in Australia and moves in this way is the Green Turtle *Chelonia mydas*. Eggs are large (mean diameter of 5.2 cm) compared with those of other turtle species that breed in Australia.

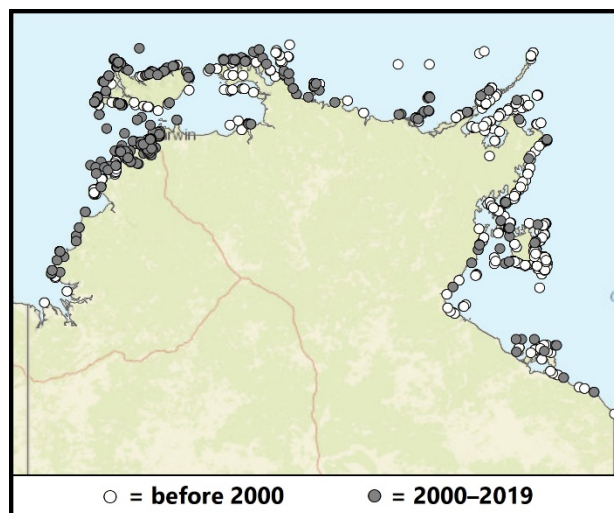


Caption: T. Simpson

Distribution

Flatback Turtles are restricted to tropical waters of Australia and New Guinea. They have an extensive distribution around the coastline of the Northern Territory (NT), and have been recorded breeding at a large number of mainland and island sites¹.

NT conservation reserves where reported: Casuarina Coastal Reserve, Garig Gunak Barlu National Park, Kakadu National Park and Nanydjaka Indigenous Protected Area.



Caption: Known localities of the Flatback Turtle in the NT (nrmmaps.nt.gov.au)

Ecology and life-history

Flatback Turtles inhabit shallow, soft-bottomed sea beds and feed on soft corals and soft-bodied animals such as jellyfish and sea cucumbers. Breeding can occur during any month of the year, though breeding may peak in winter¹.

Threatening processes

As with other marine turtles, there is a broad range of factors that threaten the Flatback Turtle. These include by-catch in commercial fisheries²; Indigenous harvest; predation of eggs and young by domestic and feral Dogs *Canis familiaris*, feral Pigs *Sus scrofa* and monitors *Varanus* spp.; marine pollution, including entanglement in ghost nets; and disturbance at breeding sites.

Conservation objectives and management

A monitoring program for the Flatback Turtle has been established in Kakadu National Park⁵.

A national recovery plan for this species, and other marine turtles, was implemented in 2003⁶. This plan included actions that: (i) aim to reduce mortality of turtles (principally through mitigating impacts of commercial fisheries, and maintaining sustainable harvests by Indigenous communities), (ii) develop and integrate monitoring programs; (iii) manage factors that affect reproductive success (in this case, outside the NT); (iv) identify and protect critical habitat (including sea grass beds); (v) enhance communication of information; and (vi) enhance international actions and cooperation.

References

- ¹ Chatto, R., 1998. A preliminary overview of the locations of marine turtle nesting in the Northern Territory, in: Kennett, R., Webb, A., Duff, G., Guinea, M., Hill, G. (Eds.). Marine turtle conservation and management in northern Australia. Northern Territory University, Darwin, pp. 33–40.
- ² Poiner, I.R., Harris, A.N.M., 1996. Incidental capture, direct mortality and delayed mortality of sea turtles in Australia's Northern Prawn Fishery. *Mar. Biol.* 125, 813–825.
- ³ Kennett, R., Robinson, C.J., Kiessling, I., Yunupingu, D., Munungurritj, N., Yunupingu, D., 2004. Indigenous

initiatives for co-management of Miyapunu/sea turtle. *Ecol. Manag. Restor.* 5, 159–166.

⁴ Groom, R.A., Griffiths, A.D., Chaloupka, M., 2017. Estimating long-term trends in abundance and survival for nesting flatback turtles in Kakadu National Park, Australia. *End. Spec. Res.* 32, 203–211.

⁵ Winderlich, S., 1998. An overview of the sea turtle research in Kakadu National Park and the surrounding area, in: Kennett, R., Webb, A., Duff, G., Guinea, M., Hill, G. (Eds.). Marine turtle conservation and management in northern Australia. Northern Territory University, Darwin, pp. 110–114.

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, 2017. Recovery Plan for marine Turtles in Australia. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.