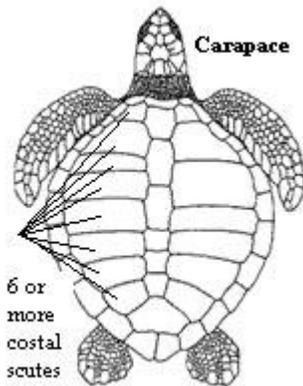


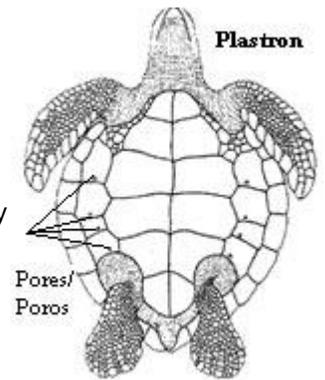
# OLIVE RIDLEY SEA TURTLE

## (*Lepidochelys olivacea*)



### General Characteristics

The name of the olive ridley originates from the olive color of the adult's carapace. Its head is triangular in shape, measuring up to 13 cm (5.1 in.) wide, with two pairs of prefrontal scales. Their carapace is circular and flat with a uniquely high and variable number (six to nine pairs) of costal scutes, and ranges from olive green to dark grey in color. The plastron is cream colored and has a small and distinct pore close to the rear margin of each of the four inframarginal scutes. Its body is deeper than the Kemp's Ridley (*L. kempii*), which is found primarily in the Gulf of Mexico and along the eastern coast of the USA.



### Size

The olive ridley is one of the smallest sea turtles; the length of the carapaces is approximately 65 cm (2 ft.) and reaches up to 50 kg. (110 lbs.). Both the front and rear flippers have one, or sometimes two, claws.

### Habitat

Olive ridleys are found throughout the tropical waters of the Pacific, Indian and southern Atlantic Oceans. In the eastern Pacific they range from Mexico to Colombia and are sometimes found off the southwestern coast of the United States. Non-nesting individuals are often found in Isla de Margarita (Venezuela) and Trinidad & Tobago; however, they rarely go deeper into the Caribbean. They typically forage offshore in surface waters, primarily in bays and estuaries. They may dive to depths of 150 meters (500 ft.) to feed on bottom-dwelling crustaceans.



### Diet

Their large and powerful jaws are adapted to their diet of mostly fish, mussels and crustaceans, particularly shrimp.

### Nesting



In addition to solitary nesting, the olive ridleys nest in great aggregations, often called "arribadas". During this phenomenon, which is often predicted by moon phases and tides, many thousands of turtles come out to nest within a short period of about 3 to 5 days. Although it seems to be a disastrous experience in the sense that nesting turtles dig up the nests laid by other turtles due to such a high density, it does have advantages in that it decreases the predation on both nests and hatchlings by quickly filling up their predators, as well as increasing the chance a hatching has to make it to the ocean. The olive ridley may only nest one, two or perhaps three times per season, but can nest annually or every two years. Inter-nesting periods are approximately 28 days for "arribada" nesters and 14 days for solitary nesters. Each nest typically has more than 100 eggs, which take approximately 55 days to hatch. Many important mass nesting sites as well as solitary sites are found within the American Continent, for example, one is located along the Pacific coast of Mexico, two along the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, and others, although smaller, along the Nicaraguan

coast. The largest nesting population is thought to be located in the Indian Ocean, with an average of almost 400,000 females nesting per year.

### **Hatchlings**

Hatchlings are dark grey in color and typically measure 42 mm (1.65 in.).

### **Migrations**

Although olive ridleys may nest annually, the species is indeed highly migratory. Recent studies show that olive ridleys reside in oceanic habitats of the eastern Pacific Ocean when they are not nesting.

### **Current Status**

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) classifies the species as Vulnerable, facing a high risk of extinction in the wild.

### **Threats**

Direct harvest of adults and eggs, incidental capture in commercial fisheries, especially shrimp trawlers, and loss of nesting habitat are main concerns for the survival of this species.

### **Population Trends**

There is evidence of downward trends at various “arribada” nesting sites, for example, at Playa Nancite, Costa Rica. The nesting population in Surinam and adjacent areas has also shown a decline, estimated at more than 80 percent over the last couple of decades. However, other nesting populations along the Pacific coast of Mexico and Costa Rica appear to be stable or increasing. Because of the existence of large aggregated nesting sites, the olive ridley is considered to be the most abundant sea turtle species in the world; however, one of the problems facing an accurate population estimate is the difficulty and inaccuracy of counting nesting females during an “arribada”.

### **Inter-American Sea Turtle Convention**

Cooperative efforts from a variety of governmental as well as non-governmental organizations to conserve distinct sea turtle populations inhabiting the American Continent have existed for many years. The Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (IAC), which entered into force in May of 2001, provides an opportunity for dialogue and action favoring sea turtle management. The IAC is the only international body establishing legal instruments and guidelines that commit the Parties to, among others, protect and conserve populations of sea turtles and their habitat, reduce incidental capture and foster international cooperation for research and management of sea turtles. Currently, eleven countries- Belize, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, United States, Guatemala, Netherlands Antilles, Honduras, México, Peru and Venezuela – are Signatory countries, meanwhile two more, Nicaragua and Uruguay, have sent in the necessary instruments for accession to the Government of Venezuela, the official depository nation.

The Convention allows exceptions for use of sea turtles and their parts to satisfy economic subsistence needs, provided that such exceptions do not undermine efforts to achieve the objective of this Convention and the Party provides a management program including limits on levels of intentional take.

### **Sources:**

Caribbean Conservation Corporation & Sea Turtle Survival League ([www.cccturtle.org](http://www.cccturtle.org))

NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources ([www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles))

Pritchard, P.C.H. and J.A. Mortimer. 1999. Taxonomy, External Morphology, and Species Identification, p. 21-38. In: K.L. Eckert,

K.A. Bjorndal, F.A. Abreu G. and M.A. Donnelly (Editors), Research and Management Techniques for the Conservation of Sea Turtles. IUCN/SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group Publ. No. 4. Washington, D.C.

Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network ([www.widecast.org](http://www.widecast.org))

### **Published by:**

Pro Tempore Secretariat of the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles (IAC), San Jose, Costa Rica, April 2005

### **Edited by:**

Belinda Dick

### **English Translation:**

Belinda Dick



### Photo Credits:

Olive ridley - Scott Handy

Olive ridleys mass nesting in Ostional, Costa Rica – Michael Jensen

Hatchling - © Dr Michael Ebner

### Illustrations:

Tom McFarland