

THREATENED SPECIES OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY



FLATBACK TURTLE

Natator depressus

Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable.

Northern Territory: Data Deficient.

Description

The flatback turtle is a marine turtle with a low domed carapace with reflexed margins. The carapace is olive, grey or pale grey-green, with average curved length of 92 cm. There are four pairs of costal shield.

Eggs are large (mean diameter = 5.2 cm) compared with most other marine turtles that breed in the NT. When ashore, flatback turtles move pairs of legs simultaneously, leaving symmetrical tracks (unlike the alternate gait of loggerhead and hawksbill turtles).



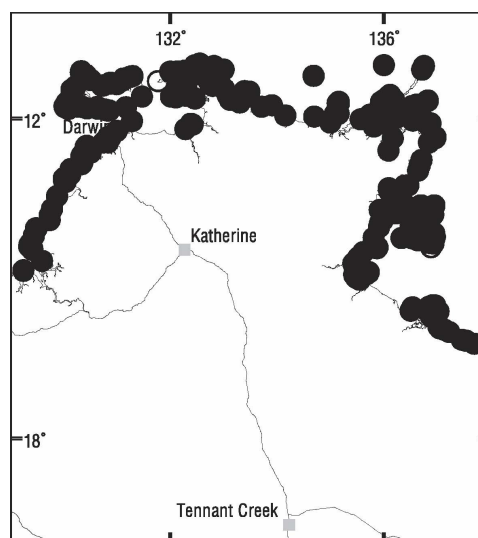
Flatback turtle. (Photo: Ray Chatto)

Distribution

Flatback turtles are restricted to tropical waters of Australia and New Guinea. They have an extensive distribution around the coastline of the NT, breeding at very many mainland and island sites (Chatto 1998).

Conservation reserves where reported:

Casuarina Coastal Reserve, Garig Gunak Barlu National Park, Kakadu National Park, Nanydjaka Indigenous Protected Area.



Known locations of flatback turtle
o = pre 1970 • = post 1970

Ecology

Flatback turtles inhabit shallow, soft bottomed sea beds and feed on soft corals and soft bodied animals such as jellyfish and sea cucumbers. They may breed during any month of the year, although this may peak in June to August (Chatto 1998).

Conservation assessment

In recognition of declines at some Australian breeding grounds and a substantial array of threatening factors, the flatback turtle is regarded as Vulnerable nationally (Environment Australia 2003).

Flatbacks probably constitute the highest breeding numbers of any sea turtle in the Northern Territory (Chatto



Northern Territory Government

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1998). In the NT, there are no substantial data on trends in population; and the species remains common and widespread. There is some anecdotal evidence of at least localised decline of marine turtles in general (Kennett *et al.* 2004).

Given the presence of some threats that cannot be quantified and the lack of trend data the species is best considered as **Data Deficient**.

Threatening processes

As with other marine turtles, there are a broad range of factors that may threaten this species. These include by-catch in commercial fisheries (Poiner and Harris 1996); Indigenous harvest; predation of eggs and young by dogs, pigs and goannas; marine pollution, including entanglement in ghost nets; and disturbance at main breeding sites.

Conservation objectives and management

A national recovery plan for this species, and other marine turtles, was implemented in 2003 (Environment Australia 2003).

This plan includes actions that: (i) aim to reduce mortality of turtles (principally through ameliorative actions within commercial fisheries, and maintenance of sustainable harvest by Indigenous communities), (ii) develop and integrate monitoring programs; (iii) manage factors that affect reproductive success (in this case, outside NT); (iv) identify and protect critical habitat (including sea grass beds); (v) enhance communication of information; and (vi) enhance international actions and cooperation.

A monitoring program for this species has been established in Kakadu National Park (Winderlich 1998).

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