

Sea Turtles of India



Photo: Sumer Verma

Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*): The name of this turtle is something of a misnomer because it is often not green in colour! The name is derived from the colour of its fat, which was used for making turtle soup. Green turtles are distributed widely in tropical waters. In India, nesting occurs on parts of the west coast, particularly Gujarat, and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep.



Photo: Alan F. Rees / ARCHELON

Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*): This is the rarest of the Indian sea turtles and is so named because of its huge head. It is known only from the Gulf of Mannar in the south and frequently nests in Sri Lanka. Its diet consists of molluscs and crustaceans which it crushes using its powerful jaws.



Photo: Sumer Verma

Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*): The species name of the hawksbill, 'imbricata' denotes the overlapping scutes on its carapace. Hawksbills have been killed for centuries for these scutes, which are used for 'tortoise shell' products such as combs and spectacle frames. These endangered turtles are at home in reefs and lagoons, where they feed mostly on sponges. In India, hawksbills nest in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep.



Photo: Kartik Shanker / Meera Anna Oommen

Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*): Largest of the world's sea turtles, it can grow to over 2 m (6.6 ft) in length and weigh more than 800 kgs! It is a champion diver and can descend to depths of over 1200 m (4000 ft) in search of food, mainly jelly fish. In India, leatherbacks now nest mainly on undisturbed beaches in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.



Photo: Kartik Shanker

Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*): This is one of the smallest species of sea turtles in the world (80 cm long) and also the most numerous and widely distributed. India is one of the few places in the world where olive ridleys gather in the thousands to nest en masse. These mass nesting events are called 'arribadas'. In India, arribadas occur in Orissa.



Photo: Sumer Verma

Green turtles are ecosystem engineers, mowing down large meadows of sea grass and changing the nature of marine ecosystems. They are found all over the world, and once numbered in the millions, but their populations have been greatly reduced by exploitation for meat. While hatchlings are omnivorous, juvenile and adult green turtles are herbivorous, feeding on different species of sea grass and algae near coral reefs. Green turtles have remarkable abilities to migrate and navigate between feeding and breeding grounds, such as from the coast of South America to the Ascension Island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.





Photo: Sumer Verma

Hawksbill turtles are amongst the few animals known to feed on sponges, which has been likened to a diet of glass. They have been exploited around the world for over 2000 years for their carapace, or 'tortoiseshell', which is used for making various products such as combs, jewelry and jewelry boxes. They usually nest under vegetation on narrow beaches, often on remote islands. They live and feed primarily near coral reefs. In India, they feed and nest in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Lakshadweep Islands.





Photo: Kartik Shanker / Meera Anna Oommen

Leatherbacks are the largest turtles in the world. They can grow to over 2 m (6.6 ft) in length, weigh over 800 kgs, and are amongst the deepest diving vertebrates. They go down to depths of 1200 m and foray into sub-arctic waters, withstanding lower temperatures than any other reptile, in order to search for jellyfish, their favourite food. In India, leatherbacks come ashore to nest on the beaches of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.



Photo: M. Muralidharan

Sea turtles mate in the off-shore waters of their nesting beaches, after migrating thousands of kilometers from their feeding grounds. The females then come ashore - usually under the cover of darkness - to lay over a hundred eggs each. They usually nest more than once during each breeding season. Males may never come onto land after they leave the beach as hatchlings. In India, olive ridley turtles congregate in large numbers in the offshore waters of Orissa each year from November to February.



Photo: Kartik Shanker

All sea turtles nest in exactly the same way. They come ashore at night, crawl about the high tide line, clear the surface sand and dig a flask shaped nest that is 2 to 3 feet depending on the species of turtle. They lay 100-150 eggs, cover the nest, camouflage it with surface sand, and then return to the sea. Sea turtles will nest many times during the season as they travel long distances to reach their breeding ground. They do not show any form of parental care. Sea turtle hatchlings are incubated by the warmth of the sun and their own metabolic heat, and their sex is determined by temperature.





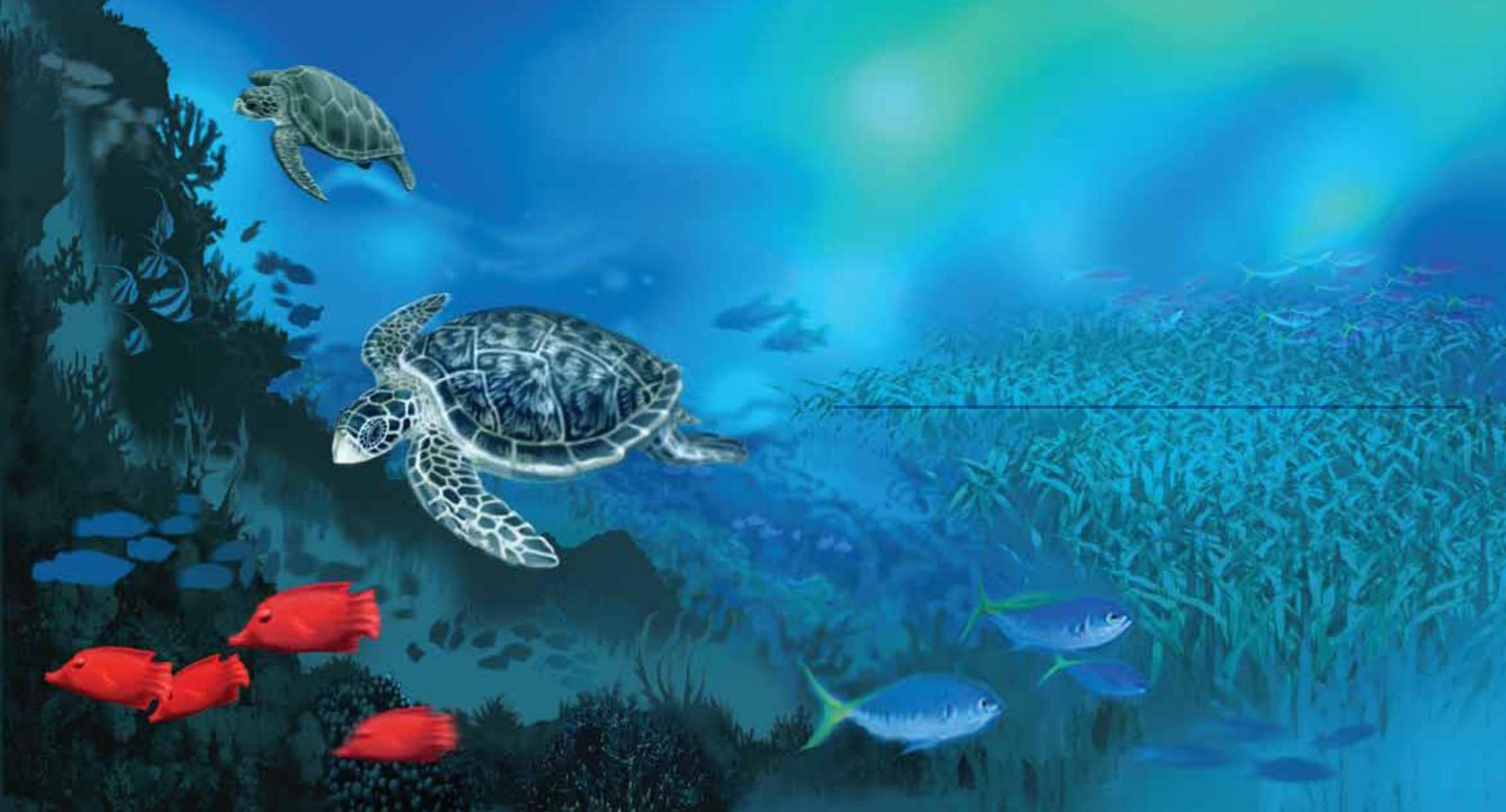
Photo: Kartik Shanker

Sea turtle hatchlings, like this leatherback, emerge from their eggs at night in order to avoid predators. Cued by the light reflecting off the surface of the water, they find their way to the sea, where they will spend the next several years drifting with the ocean currents. They will return as adults to nest on the very beach where they were born, using the earth's magnetic field to navigate.



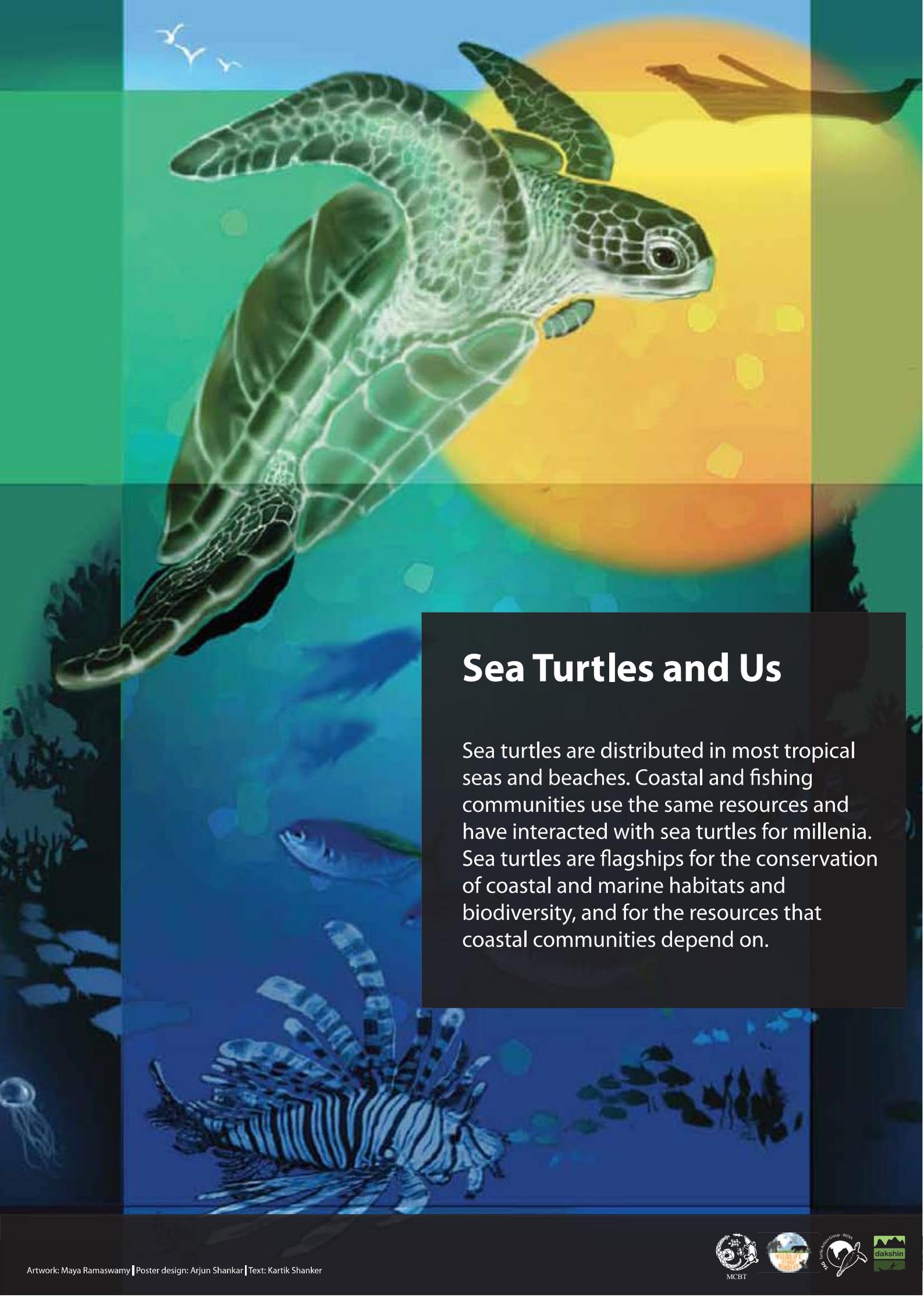
Photo: Kartik Shanker

Olive ridley turtles are known for their 'arribadas' (meaning 'arrival' in Spanish) when several thousand or even a hundred thousand turtles come ashore simultaneously to nest. Millions of eggs are laid within the span of a few days during the arribada, and that too, on a very small stretch of sandy beach. Today, arribadas can only be observed on the beaches of Orissa in India, and at a few sites in central America.



A World of Habitats

Sea turtles inhabit the land and the sea. They connect the worlds of coral reefs and seagrass meadows. They move from shallow nearshore waters to open seas, from cold temperate seas to warm tropical waters. They migrate thousands of kilometres across ocean basins to nest on crowded and remote beaches, serving as global ambassadors of conservation.



Sea Turtles and Us

Sea turtles are distributed in most tropical seas and beaches. Coastal and fishing communities use the same resources and have interacted with sea turtles for millenia. Sea turtles are flagships for the conservation of coastal and marine habitats and biodiversity, and for the resources that coastal communities depend on.