Sea Turtle 101 in the Virgin Islands

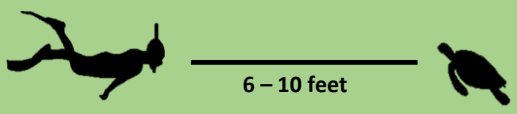
Friends of Virgin Islands National Park

- There are 7 species of sea turtles worldwide, 4 of which can be found in the USVI: green, hawksbill, leatherback, and the occasional loggerhead.
- All sea turtles are reptiles that breathe air and lay eggs.
- The **green sea turtle** is commonly found foraging on sea grass. They get their name from the color of their fat—colored by their herbivorous diet. Adult green sea turtles can weigh up to 485 pounds.
- The **hawksbill sea turtle** lays the majority of our nests on St. John. Each nest contains between 80-200 ping-pong sized eggs. Their name is derived from their hawk-like beak, which helps them eat sponges in the coral reef ecosystem. As adults, these turtles weigh around 150 pounds. The hawksbill sea turtle is *critically endangered*.
- The **leatherback sea turtle** is named for its leathery carapace which allows it to dive to depths exceeding 3900 feet. These turtles are open-ocean turtles, surviving on jellyfish. Adults can eat around 500 pounds of jellyfish in a day. The largest recorded leatherback weighed 2,019 lbs!
- The **loggerhead sea turtle** may very rarely be spotted passing by St. John. These turtles have a large head adapted for eating crustaceans and mollusks.
- Sea turtles will return to the same area they were born to nest as adults.
- Green and hawksbill sea turtles reach sexual maturity around 25-40 years old; leatherbacks around 10-15 years old.
- The chance of survival for a hatchling sea turtle to reach sexual maturity is around 1 out of 1000, excluding human threats. Including human threats, this rate is closer to 1 out of 10,000.
- Sea turtles face a number of human induced threats such as boat collisions, pollution, commercial fishing bycatch, development, poaching, and marine debris ingestion and entanglement.

All species of sea turtles found in the USVI are endangered or critically endangered.

Sea turtles play an important role in the ocean ecosystem, maintaining the balance of delicate food webs.

All species of sea turtles are protected under the Endangered Species Act in U.S. waters.



Created by VINP Sea Turtle Program