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VANUATU ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE SOCIETY

Threatened Species Factsheet No. 19

LEATHERBACK TURTLE

What are they called?

Scientific:
Dermochelys coriacea

Common English:
Leatherback, coffin-back, trunk turtle.

French: Tortue luth

Bislama:

Vernacular: There are many different names on each island.

A little about them:

They are deep-diving marine reptiles that live in the sea but return to nest on land. Leatherbacks travel the furthest of any seaturtle, migrating across entire oceans. They are the largest seaturtle reaching shell lengths of 1.5-2.5 m and weigh 300-500kg.

Their diet is mainly jellyfish. They reach maturity at 15-25 years old and females then lay eggs every 2-4 years.

Leatherback turtles nest on Ambrym, Epi, Malekula and used to nest on Efate.

What do they look like?

They are huge creatures with a blue-black body with white spots. They are the only living soft-shell seaturtle, with it's shell divided into 7 narrow sections from head to tail, made of oily skin.

The front flippers are longer than their back flippers. They do not have scales on their head.

We don't see leatherbacks as often as other seaturtles because they spend most of their time in the deep ocean.

Did you know?

- Leatherbacks are the only sea turtle that have a soft shell.
- They lay between 30-160 eggs in each nest.
- The largest recorded individual weighed 916kg!

Leatherback Turtles are classified as Vulnerable (VU) on the IUCN Red List.

Why are they threatened?

- They become caught in fishing nets and drown.
- Die from accidently eating plastic bags polluting the seas (these look like jellyfish to seaturtles).
- Consumption of eggs by humans and introduced predators
- Loss of nesting beaches

What do they do for us?

- They play an important ecological role as top predators of jellyfish, maintaining balance in the ocean's food-web. This improves fish stocks as jellyfish prey on fish and invertebrate eggs and larvae.
- Leatherback turtles are unique. They create tourism opportunities as people like to see them when they come ashore to lay eggs.

What can we do for them?

- ✓ Avoid using plastic wherever possible and put all rubbish in the bin so it doesn't end up in the ocean.
- ✓ Use fishing gear that does not catch seaturtles by accident.
- ✓ Leave nesting turtles alone and do not remove their eggs.

Want to know more?

- Read **the *Pacific Sea Turtle Education kit*** by SPREP
- Visit: www.iucnredlist.org

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