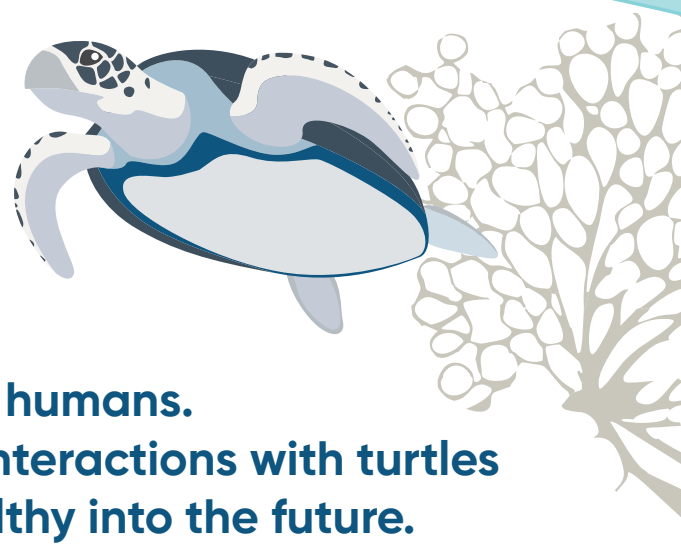
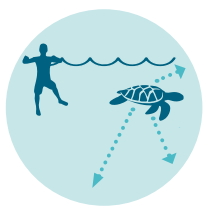
What to do when swimming, snorkelling or diving near turtles



Sea turtles are threatened species and can be easily disturbed by humans. This guideline aims to give you the knowledge to ensure that our interactions with turtles do not cause them harm or stress and they remain happy and healthy into the future.

1 Stay calm and quiet

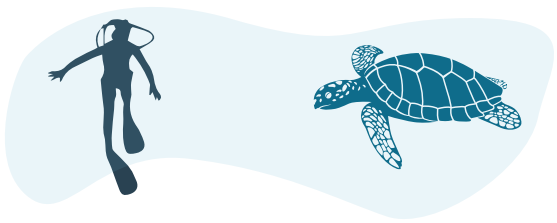
Turtles can be frightened away if you make lots of quick movements and noise. Avoid splashing and jumping into the water near turtles.



2 Give turtles space

When you enter the water or first spot a turtle don't swim towards it. Stop and wait to see if it immediately swims away. If it doesn't you can approach slowly and carefully. If the turtle changes what it is doing stop and move back.

3 Approach from the side and no closer than 2 human body lengths away



4 If the turtle shows any avoidance behaviours, move slowly and calmly away from the turtle

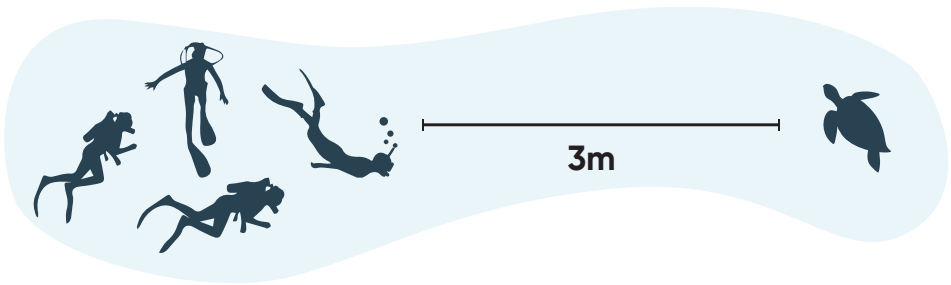
Signs of disturbance are: increased swimming speed, fast diving, change of direction, sudden change of activity, swimming away from disturbance or swimming actively towards deeper areas.

5 Let turtles breath - Do not swim directly above a turtle

Turtles need to come to the surface to breathe. Swimming above them can make them feel stressed.

6 Do not corner, crowd or surround a turtle

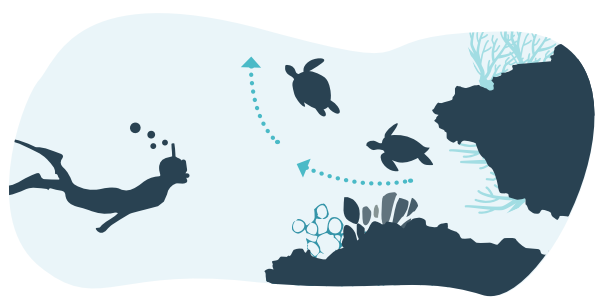
If you are in a group of more than three, everyone in the group should keep at least 5 metres away from the turtle (that's about 3 human body lengths away). Stay in a group and on the same side of the turtle so it can see an exit route if it wants to swim away.



7 Do not approach mating turtles

Sea turtles mate in the water and can be easily disturbed and may stop mating if you approach them. Male turtles can become aggressive. Turtle mating can appear very rough and it my look as if the female is in distress. Do not try to intervene to "help" the female turtle this will cause her more stress than leaving things to nature. If you suddenly find yourself near mating turtles, stay still and calm, and slowly move away.

8 If diving near turtles resting in a cave or overhang give them space to exit and surface



9 Do not touch any turtles and never hold onto a turtle or try to ride a turtle

10 Light disturbs turtles

If swimming or diving at night minimise the use of torches and video lights around the turtles. If you do use a torch, shine light on the back of turtles shells only and avoid lighting their head. Do not use white light or flash photography to take images or video of turtles at night.

11 Minimise disturbance to sleeping turtles

Do not disrupt normal sleeping behaviours. Turtles risk injury if they are suddenly startled awake and flee from their sleeping places. If a turtle begins to move away from its sleeping place when you moved towards it, stop and back off. Avoid diving at or just after dusk in a known turtle sleeping spot as swimmers or divers in the water may disturb the turtles and prevent them from using their preferred sleeping spot.

12 Turtles need time to eat

If you are lucky enough to see turtles foraging for food, keep your distance to make sure they aren't disturbed.

13 Do not attempt to feed turtles

14 When you are taking photos or filming turtles don't forget about these guideline

Protecting the turtles and yourself from harm is more important than getting the perfect image or "selfie". Always follow the guidelines to ensure both you and the turtles have the safest and most enjoyable experience.

If you do take photos or videos of turtles consider submitting the images to a citizen science programme, such as the Internet of Turtles.

Turtles are protected by Vanuatu laws:

Remember that harassing, harming or holding a turtle is an offence.

Use this QR code to see the full guidelines on the Vanuatu Environmental Science Society's website.

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