

Marine turtle life cycle



From top: Loggerhead turtle laying; green turtle digging eggs



white laying; flatback hatching



Photo: B. Legg © Commonwealth of Australia

Adult turtles migrate to a nesting area located in the region of their birth. A month or two after mating the females commence their fortnightly trips to the beach to lay eggs.

The female turtle digs out a body pit with her front flippers and then excavates a vertical egg chamber (between 30 and 60cm deep) with her hind flippers. She lays about 45 to 120 eggs, depending on the species of turtle. She fills the egg chamber with sand using her hind flippers, fills the body pit using all four flippers then returns back into the sea.

The temperature of the nest during incubation determines the sex of hatchlings. Warm, dark sand produces mostly females. Cool, white sand result mostly in males who generally take longer to hatch. After about seven to 12 weeks the eggs hatch. The hatchlings take two or more days to reach the surface where they emerge as a group, usually at night.

Once in the ocean, hatchlings are believed to enter regions where ocean currents meet. There they associate with floating seaweed mats and other flotsam caught up in ocean currents. Here they feed on tiny sea animals.

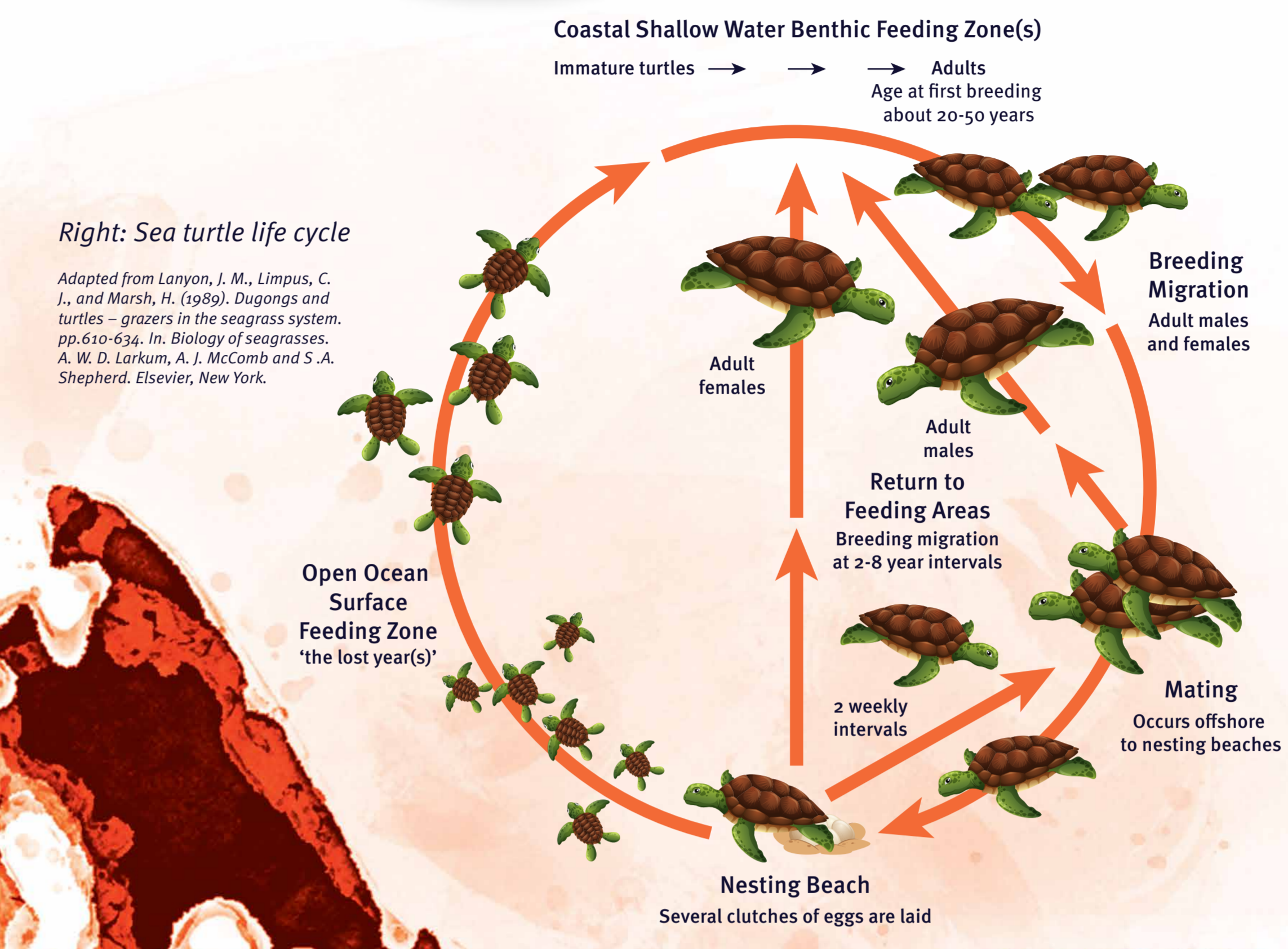
The hatchlings are rarely seen again until their shell length is 20-40cm, which may be five or 10 years after hatching. At this time, the young, free-swimming turtles migrate back to inshore foraging areas. They remain in these areas until they are ready to breed and the cycle begins again.



Learn more about responsible practices around marine turtles



Left: Nesting Flatback turtle. Above: Green turtle hatchlings emerge from the nest



Right: Sea turtle life cycle

Adapted from Lanyon, J. M., Limpus, C. J. and Heath, H. (eds), *Shagwags and turtles - grazers in the seagrass system*. pp. 101-114. In: *Biology of seagrasses*, A. W. D. Larkum, A. J. McComb and S. A. Shepherd, Elsevier, New York.

