

Sea Turtle Beaks and Diets

Sea turtles species do not eat the same diet. Hawksbill, Green, and Leatherback sea turtles have very distinct diets. Loggerheads, Kemp's Ridley, and Olive Ridley sea turtles have similar diets. The shape of a sea turtle's beak can provide insight to the type of prey that it primarily eats. The beak shape is an adaptation of sea turtles that allows them to target certain types of prey. Below are descriptions of the different beak shapes and what each turtle species eats.

Hawksbill Sea Turtles

Hawksbill sea turtles have a beak much like a bird's – hence their name. This type of beak gives Hawksbills the ability to slice into sponges and cut pieces off. It also allows them to get into the crevices of coral reefs. Hawksbills feed primarily on sponges growing on coral reefs. A small portion of their diet can consist of marine invertebrates, seaweeds, hydrozoans, and cuttlefish.

Green Sea Turtles

Green sea turtles have jaws that are serrated (jagged like a steak knife). This beak shape allows them to scrape algae off of hard substrate and it also allows them to shear seaweeds. The diet of a green sea turtle is mostly sea grasses, seaweeds and algae.

Leatherback Sea Turtles

Leatherback sea turtles are the largest sea turtles and astonishingly their diet mostly consists of jellies. Leatherback sea turtles have softer beaks than the other species of sea turtles; however, their beaks have sharp points (cusps). The cusps on a leatherback's beak can easily pierce the soft body of a jelly. Leatherbacks also have fleshy spines in their mouths that help leatherbacks keep the jelly in their mouths once they've captured it with their beaks. This species of sea turtle eats primarily jellies and other soft-bodied organisms such as hydrozoans.

Loggerhead, Kemp's Ridley and Olive Ridley Sea Turtles

Loggerhead, Kemp's Ridley and Olive Ridley sea turtles have beaks that allow them to crush through shelled-mollusks and crabs. Loggerhead sea turtles have a very large, wide head with a very strong beak. Inside of the beaks are bony plates for crushing the hard shells of their prey. Although shelled mollusks and crabs make up most of their diet, loggerheads sometimes eat jellies, marine invertebrates, cuttlefish, seaweeds, and sponges. Kemp's Ridley sea turtles have also been known to eat fish and jellies. The diet of Olive Ridley sea turtles consists of fish, shrimp, crabs, urchins, tunicates, jellies, and seaweeds.