

## The Awe-Inspiring Leatherback

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South of Malaysia, a leatherback sea turtle glides beneath the surface of the Indian Ocean. Her majestic silhouette casts an impressive shadow on the ocean floor beneath her. As the sunlight glimmers off her back, she slowly approaches the deserted shore and emerges glistening from the ocean. Normally, it would be quite easy for her to find a secluded spot to lay her eggs, but due to coastal habitat loss, she struggles to locate a safe haven. Finally, after searching for quite some time, she lays her eggs and returns to the ocean. As she slips back into the sea, a formidable shape looms behind her. Unbeknownst to the beautiful leatherback turtle, an egg poacher snatches her helpless unborn babies, taking the eggs to sell in the market. As the turtle continues her journey home, she spots a nearby jellyfish, her favorite type of food. She catches the jellyfish, but notices it does not taste the same as usual. What she does not realize is that she has just ingested a plastic bag, the likes of which are increasing in oceans worldwide. As she struggles to digest the debris, she sees her home up ahead, but she notices something is blocking her view. She swims closer, but suddenly finds herself unable to move her flippers. She struggles and thrashes, feeling helpless and confused. She has been caught in a fishing net. After a few hours of attempting to escape, she gives up. She succumbs. She relinquishes her beauty, her power, and her majesty to the abhorrent negligence of mankind.

The leatherback sea turtle, or *Dermochelys coriacea*, is a beautiful creature and a powerful swimmer. The largest type of turtle that lives in the ocean, a leatherback can grow over six feet long and up to 1400 pounds. Most

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turtles have hard, bony shells, but the leatherback is unique because of the rubbery, soft texture of its back. They are able to stay underwater for long periods of time, and they spend most of their lives in the ocean. Leatherbacks only swim to shallow estuaries to mate, and females only come ashore to lay eggs. There are only about 25,000 female leatherbacks left worldwide, and since males never come ashore, researchers are unable to count them (“Endangered”). Most subpopulations of leatherbacks are critically endangered, and conservation scientists are struggling to find ways to save these beautiful animals.

Coastal habitat loss is a major factor affecting the leatherback turtle. Without thinking of the long-term effects, people build structures such as houses, jetties, or canals too close to the areas where female leatherbacks need to lay their eggs. These infrastructures destroy the natural habitat of the sea turtle, and the people’s carelessness is equivalent to a form of abuse. Not bothering to take the time to look out for leatherbacks is just as bad as hurting them directly, because both have the same end result of harming the turtle. When landscapers implement the incorrect form of coastal development, sea turtles no longer recognize their once-familiar nesting grounds. This too contributes to the destruction of coastal habitats (“Coastal Habitat Loss”). Pollution as a result of human carelessness also affects the area where female turtles lay their eggs. For example, when people dump trash into streets or storm drains, they do not stop to think how their actions may affect the leatherback turtles. Infrastructures, coastal development, and inappropriate dumping all directly affect the habitat of the leatherback sea turtle as a result of human carelessness, a form of animal abuse.

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Egg poaching is considered to be the main cause of the decline of the leatherback turtle population. In Thailand, nearly one hundred percent of leatherback turtle eggs are poached ("Leatherback Turtle"). Poachers harvest sea turtle eggs for food without considering the reality that harvesting too many eggs can lead to population decline and eventual extinction. Poachers are careless enough to disregard the innocent lives of the majestic leatherback turtles. This act of being indifferent towards the effects of egg poaching is actually a form of neglect and animal abuse, because the poachers are not bothering to take care of the leatherbacks. The poaching of leatherback turtle eggs has led to the collapse in the population of Malaysian leatherbacks and could soon cause further harm to leatherback turtles worldwide.

A third issue affecting the leatherback turtle is the large amount of debris in the ocean. One of the most common foods a leatherback turtle eats is the jellyfish, but it can sometimes be difficult for a turtle to distinguish between a jellyfish and a form of plastic waste. Animals are unable to digest plastic, so thanks to human carelessness, leatherbacks that consume plastic debris are put at serious risk. Many leatherbacks die from ingesting plastic, and according to *Science* magazine, in 2010 alone between ten and twenty-eight billion pounds of plastic were dumped into the ocean (McDonnell). This means that in just one year, enough plastic was dumped into the oceans to possibly kill all of the remaining leatherback turtles. As humans, this type of neglectful and careless abuse needs to end. According to the American Museum of Natural History, "in recent studies, nearly half of all leatherbacks examined had plastic or cellophane in their stomachs." This staggering figure should shock humans into thinking

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harder before indirectly abusing leatherback turtles. People are needlessly harming leatherbacks and putting them at risk by not taking the time to walk five steps to the trashcan.

Finally, another major abuse problem affecting the leatherback turtle is the frequency of entanglement in fishing nets. The migration process of leatherbacks puts them in the path of countless commercial fisheries, thus increasing their chances of becoming trapped in nets. Commercial shrimp nets are one type of net in which leatherbacks are accidentally trapped, and the turtles can actually suffocate by becoming tangled in these nets. Around eleven thousand ocean turtles are trapped in nets every year, and many are leatherbacks (“Endangered”). Careless fishers who do not bother to note where they cast their nets end up inadvertently abusing leatherback turtles.

All of these abusive problems seem hopeless to combat, but in reality, everyone can take part in putting an end to the maltreatment of the leatherback turtle. To help fight coastal habitat loss, people should avoid building homes near or altering the ecosystem of noted natural habitats of the leatherback turtle. People living near the turtles’ nesting grounds should not turn on exterior lights during nesting season, because this can confuse the turtles. Egg poaching is a major problem, so to contend with this issue, people can spread awareness and make sure not to support any companies that promote egg poaching. The ocean debris issue is a predicament that every single person can take part in combating. Simply making a point to ensure that all trash ends up in a trashcan will help, because one plastic bag can be the difference between life and death for an innocent leatherback. Finally, turtle excluder devices (TEDs) that permit

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accidentally snared turtles to escape fishing nets have been included in some fisheries. Devices like TEDs are helping to prevent the unnecessary abuse of the leatherback turtle. By becoming more aware of the abuse of the leatherback turtle, people can work together to fight this issue.

Fishers, egg poachers, and even everyday people are unknowingly abusing the leatherback turtle, a beautiful, magnificent creature. People may not realize that they are abusing the leatherback, so this issue needs to be brought to light. Coastal habitat destruction, egg poaching, ocean debris, and fishing nets are the main causes of the decline of the leatherback turtle population. By working together to make everyone more aware of this issue, people can truly make a difference in the life of a leatherback. Everyone could cooperate to create a world in which the turtle's story went something like this:

South of Malaysia, a leatherback sea turtle glides beneath the surface of the Indian Ocean. Her majestic silhouette casts an impressive shadow on the ocean floor beneath her. As the sunlight glimmers off her back, she slowly approaches the deserted shore and emerges glistening from the ocean. Thanks to the efforts of the humans to preserve her coastal habitat, she has no problem finding a secluded spot to lay her eggs. She builds a perfect nest for her unborn baby turtles and quietly slips back into the sea. As the leatherback begins her journey home, she spots a nearby jellyfish, her favorite type of food. She catches the jellyfish and enjoys the gratifying feeling of being satiated and content. She sees her home up ahead, and with a few powerful strokes of her imposing front flippers, finds herself safe and sound. Thanks to the conscious efforts of mankind, she knows she will always retain her beauty, her power, and her majesty. Ten

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weeks later, fifty little leatherback turtles emerge from their eggs. Together, they make their way home to the sea.

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