Turtles

Turtles can rarely be seen on the landside because the sea is their habitat and only the female turtles come ashore and that too only in the night and early in the morning. But Land turtles are seen frequently.

There are 250 species of turtles we can find on Earth. Seven of these live in the ocean and are called sea turtles. The other remaining 243 species live on land or in freshwater ponds and marshlands. The terrestrial turtles, those who simply live on land are called tortoises.

Five of the seven species that live in the ocean, which are called sea turtles, usually visit the shores of Sri Lanka to breed.

What turtles can find in Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka is one of those countries in the world that could boast of having 3 major types of Chelonians, freshwater terrapins, land tortoises, and marine turtles.

Five out of seven marine turtles in the world occur in the waters around Sri Lanka

1. Olive Ridley Turtle – Lepidochelys olivacea
2. Leatherback Turtle – Dermochely coriacea
3. Green Turtle – Chelonia myclas
4. Hawksbill Turtle – Eretmochelys imbricate
5. Loggerhead Turtle – Caretta Caretta

Freshwater turtles

* Red-eared slider – Trachemys scripta
* Flapshell turtle – Lissemys punctata
* Spotted black turtle – Melanochelys trijuga thermalis
* Parker’s black turtle – Melanochelys trijuga parkeri

The sea turtles are called “Kesbawa” in Sinhala and “Amai” in Tamil in Sri Lanka. There are three turtle species of freshwater turtles and one terrestrial you can find in Sri Lanka. The shells of the turtles and tortoises are dissimilar. The carapace or top part of the shell of the turtle turtles are streamlined and short making them swim easily. The leathery turtles have a thick leathery skin instead of a bony shell.

Turtles have broad, flattened flippers whilst and the flippers of turtles make it very difficult for females to move on the beaches where they come back to the nest.

The male turtles, once they get into the sea as hatchlings they never come back ashore though the females come back to the same beaches to lay their eggs. Turtles usually take at least 20 years to mature sometimes even as much as 30 years. Mature females after mating at sea, come ashore to lay their eggs. Female turtles move as far as they can on the beach to lay their eggs to ensure that the water coming up with the tide does not reach the eggs and spoil them.

Usually a female turtle labors around 75 to 130 eggs at once. This number could change with the species of turtle. The eggs take around 50 days to hatch and as soon as they are born, they make their way to the sea.

Sea turtles journey between land and sea and swim thousands of ocean miles during their long lifetimes. They wait decades until they can reproduce, returning to the same beaches where they were born to lay their eggs. Females can lay hundreds of eggs in one nesting season, yet few will yield hatchlings that survive their first year of life. Beyond these significant natural challenges, sea turtles face multiple threats caused by humans, such as bycatch in commercial fishing gear, illegal tread, consumption, and climate changes.

Lots of sea turtles are at risk of extinction due to their softer shell being by-catch in fishermen’s nets, and due to poaching of their eggs. They are considered “critically endangered” and Sri Lanka hasn’t seen a Leatherback turtle on its shores in recent years.

One of the biggest problems in Sri Lanka is human poachers, who mishandle the eggs to sell to turtle sanctuaries or to locals as a source of food or medicine.