

LEARNING TURTLES



TURTLES are not immortal as believed by some, but, yes, they do live longer than other animals. The maximum life-span of turtles is approximately a hundred years or more. For over 250 million years, turtles have survived and still survive, consistently maintaining their original morphological structure.

Belonging to the reptile family, turtles and tortoises are easily distinguishable because of their characteristic bony shells covered with horny shields or leathery skin. There are about 250 different species of turtles which vary greatly in size from 10.16 cm to 198.12 cm and the maximum weight recorded for turtles is 4.5 kg.

When alarmed or in danger, the turtle draws its head, legs and tail within the shell which then becomes its protective armour-like covering. Turtles are generally characterized by a short, stout body covered above and below with a bony carapace and plastron, respectively, which are joined on either side by another bony bridge. They are toothless but have a beak covered with

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According to a Gond myth the Earth was created out of a tiny grain given to God by a great turtle. Now of course science knows better

Photography: J. A. Rao

sharp, horny sheaths making an effective cutting edge.

Known to possess keen eyesight, turtles are one of the few animals who can distinguish colours—especially red. However, their sense of hearing is feeble.

Generally turtles are slow moving except for seafaring ones who use their modified forefeet as flippers and swim at fairly high speeds. Unlike them, the fresh water turtles have flat shells and use their legs as paddles in water.

All turtles come ashore to lay eggs. The female digs a hole in the ground, lays her eggs in it and carefully covers them with sand or mud. The eggs hatch by the heat of the Sun.

People often tend to confuse between the tortoise, terrapin and the turtle. The land reptile is called a tortoise, the freshwater reptile a terrapin and the sea reptile a turtle.

River turtles or 'aquatic vultures', clean up aquatic habitats by consuming dead and decaying animals. Very often the Indian flapshell turtle (*Lissemys punctata*) is used by villagers to cleanse well water of aquatic insects.