

I've found a stranded turtle. What do I do?

Whether the turtle is alive or dead, please call it in to 1300-ANIMAL, the RSPCA-run hotline that now handles marine strandings calls for the Queensland government. Data on turtle populations and injuries/deaths comes directly from these calls, so every animal that is reported to the hotline increases the accuracy of our data on sea turtles and helps guide management decisions.

The more information we can collect about a stranded turtle, the better. The following information is the most important and should be collected for both living and dead animals:

- **Species:** Can you determine what species of sea turtle it is? On the Queensland coast, the most common are green turtles, flatbacks, loggerheads, and hawksbills. Less commonly found are olive ridley turtles and leatherbacks.
- **Size:** Can you estimate the size of the turtle? Scientists use the curved carapace length (CCL) to classify turtles by age group. Generally, turtles that are 90cm or more are classified as adults, anything under 65cm is a juvenile, and turtles that are between 65-90cm are sub adults. It's great to have an exact measurement, but using hand spans or shoe lengths is a good way to get an idea of the size of a turtle.
- **Location:** Can you describe where the turtle is located? Many phones have GPS applications built in, but a name and general location along a beach with landmarks (if any) is helpful too.
- **Tag:** Does the turtle have a flipper tag? Tags are usually located on the left front flipper. If a tag is present, record the number on the front of the tag; this will help researchers link any previous data on that turtle with its present location and condition.
- **Injuries or marks:** Does the turtle have any obvious injuries or missing limbs? Boat strikes, for example, usually leave large gashes on the shell or flippers. Information about injuries and marks can help scientists determine the biggest threats to turtles in a given area.
- **Photographs:** If you have access to a camera, photographs are always helpful in determining a turtle's condition!



Standard location for flipper tags



CCL is measured along the mid-line from tip of carapace behind the head to the centre of the rear carapace above the tail.

If the turtle is dead, reporting it to 1300-ANIMAL is usually sufficient; unless the carcass is in a high-traffic area, it is okay to leave the turtle where it is. In high-traffic areas (and depending on the condition of the carcass), it may be better to move it to a less-travelled area or bury it if possible. The hotline operators will advise if this is necessary.

If the turtle is still alive, you can do a preliminary assessment of its condition. Some turtles may not be in distress at all; juvenile green turtles in particular will come into shallow areas at low tide to feed and bask, and will go out with the next tide. Here are some signs of a sick or malnourished turtle:

- Carapace covered in algae and barnacles: wild turtles usually have a few barnacles, but a carapace that is loaded with barnacles and algae is a sign that it is not moving around well, often a symptom of illness or weakness.
- Carapace that is soft around the edges: in green turtles in particular, a soft shell is a sign of poor health. The scutes (scales on the shell) should be hard to the touch and not flaking off.
- Sunken eyes: healthy turtles have slightly protruding eyes; sick or starving turtles will have notably sunken eye sockets.
- Sunken plastron (bottom of shell): a fat and healthy turtle will have a plastron that sticks out; a sick turtle's plastron will look caved in, and sometimes the breastbone will have rubbed through the plastron completely.
- Skinny neck and flippers: Sick turtles may have no fat in their limbs and neck.
- Tumours on eyes, neck, flippers: Some turtles may have cauliflower-like Fibropapillomas tumours on their bodies, eyes and mouths.



Sunken eyes, thin neck & flippers, algae covering carapace



The same turtle after rehab: fat neck/flippers, protruding eyes, firm carapace

If you aren't sure if a turtle is sick or healthy, report it to the hotline with your location and the best description you can give of the turtle. Any information helps!

What not to do:

- Don't try to move or transport the turtle yourself. As all species of sea turtles are protected, they are covered under strict federal laws governing who can handle and transport them. The RSPCA hotline is manned 24 hours a day, so report the animal and let the rangers or authorised volunteers transport the turtles if necessary.
- Don't put your fingers near a turtle's mouth. Even a sick turtle has impressive jaw strength and sharp beaks that can sever a human finger with ease. A turtle's flippers are also very powerful, so try to maintain a safe distance for your own protection and for the animal's.