

Flippin' hard: Myanmar's sea turtles fight against the odds

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Rangers release the baby turtles onto the beach and into the sea, where myriad predators await

Peril plagues the lives of Myanmar's baby turtles: if crabs don't get them before they scramble from beach to sea, then poachers or fishing

trawlers might finish them off instead.

Myanmar's waters boast five of the world's seven [sea turtle species](#), including the critically endangered hawksbill, the endangered green turtle and the olive ridley, leatherback and loggerhead turtles—all listed as vulnerable.

"If we don't conserve the turtles properly, they will all disappear in the near future," head ranger Phone Maw tells AFP on Thameehla island in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta.

The 56-year-old has devoted most of the last two decades to the creatures, scouring the island's 1.5-mile (2.5-kilometre) long coastline three times a night for nesting females.

The reptiles, which can grow to more than a metre in length and weigh as much as a large piano, lay around 100 eggs in a hole dug with their hind flippers before covering the clutch with sand and returning to the water.

Poachers are the first danger, even at this conservation site dedicated to the marine reptiles.

Turtle eggs can sell for a dollar each, around 10 times the price of a chicken egg.

Crab gauntlet

So Phone Maw and his colleagues dig up the newly laid eggs and rebury them in a protected area until they hatch 50 to 60 days later.



The endangered green turtle, shown here, is one of five turtle species present in Myanmar's waters

Putting them back at the right depth is crucial.

Sea turtles have temperature-dependent sex determination—warmer temperatures produce more females while cooler temperatures result in more males.

Once hatched, the rangers release the baby turtles onto the beach and into the sea, where myriad predators await.

AFP watched as an army of red crabs scuttled to drag away some hatchlings while more fortunate siblings floundered to the frothy waters,

the first hurdle of their existence complete.



Rangers dig up the newly-laid eggs and rebury them in a protected area

But trawler nets are the biggest culprit in the [turtles'](#) dwindling population, entangling the creatures which must surface to breathe.

Illegal dynamite fishing and sand dredging are also lethal and the effect of marine pollution has been devastating.

Southeast Asia's waters are choked with plastic and more than half of the eight million tonnes dumped into the world's oceans each year comes

from just five countries: China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand.

In June, a dead [green turtle](#) washed up on a Thai beach, its stomach jammed with plastic shreds, rubber bands and other debris.



The turtles lay around 100 eggs in a hole dug with their hind flippers before covering the clutch

Days before, an autopsy of a pilot whale revealed 80 plastic bags inside.

This week a WWF report warned that unbridled human consumption had destroyed much wildlife worldwide, wiping out 60 percent of all

fish, birds, amphibians, mammals and reptiles in the last half century.

Just two out of every 1,000 [turtle hatchlings](#) used to survive until adulthood, Phone May says.

"Now it's even lower because of all the pollution," he adds sadly.



Ranger Phone Maw watches a staff member dig up turtle eggs in a protected area



Crabs scuttle to drag away some hatchlings while more fortunate siblings floundered to the frothy waters



The reptiles can grow to more than a metre in length and weigh as much as a large piano



The sex of sea turtles is determined by the temperature of their eggs during incubation



Trawler nets kill large numbers of turtles, entangling them and leaving them unable to surface to breathe



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