

The Turtles of Chagar Hutang

She swam across an ocean to lay her eggs on one small beach. She had been there before — about twenty-five years ago.

6 min read

Before you read

- **hatchling** — a baby animal that has just come out of its egg
- **flipper** — a wide flat limb used for swimming
- **nest** — a hollow where eggs are laid
- **ranger** — a person whose job is to protect wild places
- **instinct** — something an animal knows without being taught
- **endangered** — in danger of dying out completely



A green turtle coming ashore at night on Chagar Hutang beach

¹ Chagar Hutang is a small curved beach on Redang Island, off the coast of Terengganu in Malaysia. In the daytime it looks like any other beach. At night, between April and September, green turtles come out of the sea and climb up the sand.

² A female green turtle does not lay her eggs just anywhere. Scientists believe she returns to the very beach where she hatched, even if she has spent her whole life swimming hundreds of kilometres away. Nobody teaches her the way. This is instinct.

³ When she reaches dry sand, she digs. Her back flippers work like a pair of spoons, scooping out a deep, narrow hole. Into it she lays about one hundred eggs, soft and round, each one roughly the size

of a ping-pong ball. Then she covers the nest, flattens the sand so that it is hard to see, and crawls back to the water. She never sees her babies.

⁴ The eggs sit in the warm sand for about two months. Something surprising happens while they wait: the temperature of the sand decides whether the hatchlings will be male or female. Cooler sand makes more males, warmer sand makes more females.



Hatchlings heading down the sand towards the bright horizon

⁵ When the hatchlings dig their way out, they move towards the brightest light they can see. For millions of years that light has been the open sky above the sea, so the instinct worked perfectly.

⁶ Today it does not always work. A hotel lamp, a torch or a bright window can be brighter than the horizon. Hatchlings then crawl the wrong way, inland, where they grow tired, dry out, or are eaten by crabs before they ever reach the water.

⁷ This is one reason green turtles are endangered. There are others: nets, plastic bags that look like jellyfish, and people who dig up the eggs to sell.

⁸ At Chagar Hutang, rangers and university researchers watch the beach every single night of the season. They record each nest, keep lights low, and guard the eggs until they hatch. Tens of thousands of hatchlings have reached the sea from this one beach.

⁹ Here is the patient part. A green turtle may need twenty-five years to grow up. The hatchlings protected tonight will not come back to lay their own eggs until the children watching them are adults.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. Where is Chagar Hutang?
 - A On Redang Island, Malaysia
 - B In northern Australia
 - C On the coast of India
 - D On an island in Greece
2. What does a female turtle use to dig her nest?
 - A Her mouth
 - B Her front flippers
 - C Her back flippers
 - D Her shell
3. What decides whether hatchlings are male or female?
 - A The size of the egg
 - B The temperature of the sand
 - C How deep the nest is
 - D The month they hatch
4. Why do bright lights near the beach cause a problem?
 - A They wake the mother turtle
 - B They make the sand too warm
 - C Hatchlings crawl towards them instead of the sea
 - D They attract crabs to the nest

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three full sentences.

5. The hatchlings' instinct to follow the brightest light worked for millions of years. Explain why it now puts them in danger.

6. Why is it important that the rangers watch the beach every night of the season, rather than only now and then?

Part C

Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

7. The passage says the hatchlings saved tonight will not return for about twenty-five years. Why might that make protecting them harder for people to keep doing? Use something from the text in your answer.

8. If you lived in a town next to a turtle beach, what is one thing you would ask people to change, and why would that change help?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. A — on Redang Island, Malaysia | 2. C — her back flippers | 3. B — the temperature of the sand | 4. C — hatchlings crawl towards them instead of the sea

Part B

5. The brightest light used to be the sky over the sea, so following it led them to the water. Now hotel lamps and torches can be brighter, so the same instinct leads them inland, away from the sea, where they dry out or are eaten. Accept any answer showing the instinct did not change but the surroundings did.

6. Turtles come ashore on different nights all through the season, and a nest left unwatched could be dug up or disturbed. Accept: eggs can be stolen, nobody knows which night a turtle will arrive, hatchlings emerge at unpredictable times.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

7. A strong answer connects the long wait to people losing interest, or to the person protecting them never seeing the result — and quotes the twenty-five-year figure. A weaker answer repeats the fact without explaining why it matters.

Prompt with: who gets to see the result of the work?

8. Any reasonable suggestion counts — dimming lights, no torches on the beach, clearing plastic — as long as the child explains how it helps the turtles. Mark the link between the action and the effect.

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