Discovery 15, I live in the sea: Marine reptiles, Sea Snakes and Salties

Marine Notes courtesy Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

There are three major groups of marine reptiles on the Great Barrier Reef: sea snakes, crocodiles and marine turtles.

**Sea snakes**

Seventeen species of sea snakes have been reported in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Some species are found mostly on and around coral reefs whereas others are found over sandy and muddy areas of seabed. The olive sea snake (*Aipysurus laevis*) is most commonly encountered by divers on the Reef. Like all sea snakes it has a flattened tail and is an excellent swimmer.

Sea snakes are among the most venomous snakes in the world, possessing some of the most potent toxins known. Most are extremely curious and will approach divers. However, except for during the breeding season, sea snakes are not generally aggressive.

Sea snakes have adapted to life in water by developing a paddle tail and a body shaped like the keel of a boat. They breathe air and have valved nostrils so that when they dive down they do not get a nose full of water. They usually stay down for about 20 or 30 minutes before coming up for another breath of air. Sea snakes may feed on fish eggs or burrowing eels, but most feed on fish, even stonefish. They give birth to live young in the sea.

The species of sea snakes found mostly on and around coral reefs are more or less free from human pressure. However, some illegal collection of olive sea snakes for the aquarium trade does occur. Other species roam over the seabed away from the reefs, and these species are at risk from being caught and killed by trawlers.

**Salties (estuarine crocodiles)**

Estuarine crocodiles, also known as ‘salties’, occur along the coast of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and can be regularly found on islands in the Far Northern Section of the Reef. They are generally considered as temporary migrants to the Great Barrier Reef, as they do not spend much time in these waters, but prefer to live in coastal river systems. However, estuarine crocodiles are tolerant of an extremely wide range of fresh water and marine habitats and have been recorded swimming strongly in the open ocean more than 1000 kilometres from the nearest land. Be mindful of warning signs and always take extreme care when visiting areas where crocodiles might live.