

Marine Turtle Newsletter

Egypt Project Update

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The Darwin Initiative Egyptian marine turtle project is now into the second year of its three year term. During the 1998 nesting season the entire Mediterranean coast of Egypt was surveyed. A small population of loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*), and a single green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) were found to be nesting on the northern coast of the Sinai peninsula close to the border with Israel (Clarke et al. in press). This nesting population has been closely monitored throughout the 1999 season and basic scientific data on its status and ecology collected.

During the course of the project, a public awareness campaign and training programme has also been in operation. To date the project has hosted six public awareness seminars at a number of venues along the Mediterranean coast; at the Suez Canal University in the town of El Arish, at a school in Sheik Zwayed (the two towns closest to primary nesting beaches), at the fishermen's cooperative building at lake Bardawil, the fishing port in Port Said and at the Oceanographic Institute in the city of Alexandria. These meetings have been attended by over 400 representatives from government agencies, fishermen's groups, academic institutes, the military, religious parties and women's organizations. The level of awareness of the general public in Egypt about marine turtles and their current status was found to be poor. Many local people living in coastal areas were not aware of what a marine turtle was, did not know that they nested in the Mediterranean, and had no grasp of the concept of endangered species or species conservation. As a result the general themes of the meetings have been to explain what turtles are, to describe their life cycle and their need to come ashore to nest, to point out that they take a long time to become sexually mature and reproduce, and to reiterate that their existence is currently threatened by man's activities such as beach development and pressure from fishing. The illegality of killing adult turtles caught at sea and the pilfering of eggs from nests has also been reiterated.

The project's training programme initially included the instruction of four Egyptian biologists at the University of London in spring 1998, these trainees have subsequently returned to Egypt and have conducted their own training course for biologists from the Suez Canal University and the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency. A total of fifteen people attended a five day course held at the conference centre in Zaranik protected area just outside the town of El Arish. This was a perfect venue as the protected area incorporates a large section of one of the most important marine turtle nesting beaches found on the Mediterranean coast. During the course, participants were instructed in various aspects of turtle identification, biology, conservation, track identification, nest relocation and threat assessment.

In addition to formal meetings and training courses, the project has handed out over 4,000 items of promotional materials, such as T-shirts, Ramadan calendars, school notebooks, leaflets and address books, to schools and locals inhabiting areas of the coast on which nesting beaches have been identified. Such materials promote the message of turtle conservation and provide the contact telephone numbers of the project headquarters where more information can be obtained if required. Through the distribution of written literature military personnel and police forces in the area have been made aware of the problems associated with the capture of adult turtles and pilfering of nests. Accounts of several incidents have been relayed to project personnel of the military arresting people on the beach that have been found in possession of either turtle carcasses or eggs. Such actions were unheard of before the Darwin project initiated its public awareness campaign in the area

The message of turtle conservation has also been conveyed to a wider national audience through the Egyptian media. Project coordinators have appeared on national television six times in the past 18 months giving interviews about conservation efforts along the Mediterranean coast, and no fewer than five major articles about marine turtles have appeared in the national press. Through a generous donation from Amoco/BP, ten beach signs explaining that the area is a marine turtle nesting site and protected by Egyptian law have been erected along the Sinai coast.

Other conservation practices that have been initiated this season include the establishment of a hatchery within the bounds of Zaranik protected area and in sight of a small military post which deterred potential poachers. A total of six nests were transplanted to the hatchery during the 1999 season, these nests had either been laid too close to the waters' edge and would be inundated during a spring tide, or had been laid in a tourist area where they were likely to be trampled or pilfered. Transplanted nests were monitored by scientists and basic parameters such as incubation temperature, incubation period and hatching success quantified.

Many of the Bedouin people and fishermen who are primarily responsible for turtle exploitation have no comprehension of the need for conservation or of the reasons why species become endangered. The challenge for conservationists working in the region is to re-educate a population which has believed for centuries that the country's natural resources are boundless and exist only to be exploited by man. Overcoming such deep beliefs will take a lot of time and patience on behalf of any conservation programme working in Egypt, hopefully the efforts outlined above are a step in the right direction.

CLARKE, M., A.C. CAMPBELL, S.H. HAMEID & S. GHONEIM. In press. Preliminary report on the status of marine turtle nesting populations on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. *Biological Conservation*.