

Marine Turtle Newsletter

Number 63 October 1993

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SURVEY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN COAST BETWEEN ALEXANDRIA AND EL-SALUM, EGYPT

The UNEP Regional Activity Center for Specially Protected Areas (RAC/SPA, Tunisia) and the Mediterranean Association to Save the Sea Turtles (MEDASSET) recently undertook a survey of the Mediterranean coast of Western Egypt for nesting sea turtles. The project was carried out in cooperation with the National Institute of Oceanography and Fisheries, Alexandria and with a mixed team of Egyptian and German researchers headed by Dipl.-Biol. Max Kasperek. All beaches between Alexandria and El-Salum on the Libyan border were surveyed for sea turtle nesting during the peak nesting season in June and July, 1993 (Table 1). The survey was carried out with the aid of ground patrols. An assessment of the coast for potential nesting of marine turtles was made and information on habitats and other animal species was compiled.

Table 1. The coast between Alexandria and El-Salum was divided into five regions for a 1993 survey of sea turtle nesting activity. Distances are measured in km.

Region	Coast length	Number of beaches	Total beach length
Arabs Gulf	170	24	85.6
Gulf of Hekma	77	7	26.0
Abu Hashafa Bay	82	5	31.5
Marsa Matruh West	174	18	59.6
Gulf of Salum	99	9	45.9
Total	602	63	248.6

Sea turtles were found to nest in the study area. All tracks of emerging nesting turtles were identified to be loggerheads, *Caretta caretta*. Successful nesting was confirmed through records of hatchlings. These are the first records of sea turtle nesting in this part of the Mediterranean. Nesting numbers were low compared to other parts of the Mediterranean (i.e., Turkey, Greece). Nests were distributed throughout the entire study area more or less randomly, there was no concentration of nesting in any specific area. We also received information about nesting in the eastern Nile delta, an area which will be covered during the second phase of this survey. The lack of large rookeries between Alexandria and El-Salum emphasizes the need for protection of the already known important beaches in Greece and Turkey, and the need for a complete survey of the east Egyptian and Libyan coasts for hitherto unknown nesting beaches.

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Several fishermen and local people were interviewed for information about sea turtles. All fishermen were familiar with them and have confirmed their occurrence in the sea. Fishermen will catch them whenever the opportunity arises. Sea turtle meat is consumed by only a few people, including coptic Christians and Muslims. Some people drink the blood, as well, which is considered to be an aphrodisiac and to increase fertility. The only place where turtles are offered and sold for consumption is the fish market in Alexandria. Turtles caught in other areas (e.g., Marsa Matruh) are brought to the Alexandria market. Several dead turtles were found washed ashore. They all, including the ones seen in fish markets and elsewhere, were of the species C. caretta. No indication of the green turtle (Chelonia mydas) was found in the Egyptian waters. Egyptian authorities are urged to take immediate, legal steps to prohibit the trade in marine turtles and to ensure that such legislation is properly enforced. Since commercial sale appears to be limited to the market in Alexandria, it should be relatively easy to control the entire turtle trade.

The study area includes large, almost unspoilt coastal ecosystems with white primary sand dunes and limestone cliffs which we found to be unique in the Mediterranean Sea. Tourist development is growing rapidly with many new holiday villages, hotels, and recreation facilities being built particularly between Alexandria and El-Alamein. This development is threatening the coastal ecosystems. The Egyptian coast is badly polluted with crude oil and plastic rubbish which is washed ashore. From the inscriptions on plastic bags and wrappings, it is understood that the main source of the rubbish is Egypt, Italy, and Greece. Egyptian authorities are advised to protect the, so far, almost unspoilt coastal habitats against development. The white sand dunes and limestone ridges should be conserved and declared a national heritage, and should be protected by law. In particular, the sand dunes around El-Alamein, Marsa Matruh and Sidi Barrani need special protection. Several of these areas now have military status and thus restricted access and restrictions to development. However, tourist development is an imminent threat and several sandy beaches between El-Alamein and Alexandria, which used to be military areas, are now being developed for tourism. We fear that the same fate could await other similar remote areas in the near future. Finally, Egyptian authorities are advised to take immediate steps, nationally and internationally, against pollution of their sea and their beaches with crude oil and plastic litter. International bodies like UNEP are asked to support the Egyptian Government in its efforts against pollution of the Mediterranean Sea.

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