

Endangered species: Egypt's marine turtles

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For over 100 million years, marine turtles have inhabited the world's oceans. These reptiles, which existed before the dinosaurs, have a large carapace, four strong paddle-like flippers and a characteristic beak-like mouth to crush food.

Of only seven species of marine turtles that still exist in the world today, five of them are found in Egypt along the Mediterranean and Red Sea. These include: the Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), the Hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricate*), the Leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), the Loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*) and the Olive Ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*).

According to Dr. Sherif Bahaa al-Din, Scientific Advisor to the NGO Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE), three of these species are found in the Mediterranean. The Leatherback turtle appears on the IUCN red list of threatened species and is considered "critically endangered" while the Green turtle is considered endangered and the Loggerhead is listed as vulnerable. The latter species is considered the most common of the three.

"In the Red Sea, the critically endangered Hawksbill is found. It is the commonest in areas with coral reefs, while the Green is concentrated in areas lined with sea-bed grass," Bahaa al-Din explains, adding that it is very hard to give a precise estimate of the marine turtle population in Egypt as no comprehensive survey on breeding has been conducted. "I guess there could be around 1000 marine turtles," he says with some hesitation.

Mohamed Nada, an expert in Marine turtles, agrees that it is problematic to estimate the turtles' population in Egypt because they migrate. "In the Mediterranean, the most important nesting sites are in Turkey, Cyprus and Greece. The turtles come to Egypt and Libya to feed in the winter." He says that "we can estimate that there are 500 female Green turtles and 2000 female Loggerheads in the Mediterranean," although he points out that the figures are unreliable.

Although there is no study to support the theory that the population of marine turtles has decreased overtime, both experts and fishermen are adamant. The number one threat to the turtles' survival is the irresponsible concreting of coastlines which destroys nesting sites. Bahaa al-Din explains, "Marine turtles have a preference for nice, sandy beaches to nest in. Unfortunately, these are developers' favorite beaches as well!"

Dr. Agnese is a Marine biologist at HEPCA (Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association) responsible for a newly launched initiative entitled the "Turtle Research and Conservation Project" to protect marine turtles. He explains that other factors are

responsible for the decrease of the creature's population in the Red Sea. "Artificial lightings on the nesting beaches disorient the turtles. Pollution, speedboats, and fishing are very harmful as well," she explains.

Consumption of turtle meat, which is rare in the Red Sea region and cannot be considered a serious threat to the turtles there, may still constitute a threat in Alexandria.

Mohamed Nada issued a report about ten years ago on the sea turtle trade at al-Anfoushi Fish Market in Alexandria. "At the time," he explains, "you could find from 2 to 20 living sea turtles for sale at the market stalls, depending on the season."

Nada explains that the tradition of turtle meat consumption and blood drinking is very ancient in the fishermen community of Bahary, an area close to the Fish Market. "The men would drink turtle blood because it was considered an aphrodisiac, while women would do so because it was believed to increase the chances of becoming pregnant," says Nada. "It was also believed that turtle blood helped reduce anaemia, although this has not been proven scientifically."

Today, turtles are not visibly sold in the Fish Market, which does not mean that the consumption and commercialization of the species has stopped completely. "Although it is illegal to sell marine turtles because they are an endangered species, fishermen who accidentally trap a turtle in their fishing nets will still try to sell it," he explains, stressing that some fishermen would sell turtles to connoisseurs directly from their house, or would cut up the creature directly on the fishing boat and keep the meat in plastic bags to deceive vigilant border guards.

Marine turtles, like any species serving to enrich our biodiversity, have a role to play in keeping the ecosystem balanced. Bahaa al-Din, explains that the Loggerheads, which live in the Mediterranean, have an important role to play. "The loggerheads feed on jellyfish. When the population is too little, we experience massive jellyfish invasions on the coasts that sting swimmers. When such an invasion happens, it means that the balance is lost and that there has been a disruption in the system," he adds.

Agnese from HEPCA explains that marine turtles play an essential role in keeping the Red Sea healthy and full of life. "The Green turtle maintains a healthy sea-grass bed, which is home to many spawning fish, mollusks and crustacean, while the Hawksbill turtle helps maintain a healthy coral reef," she explains.

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