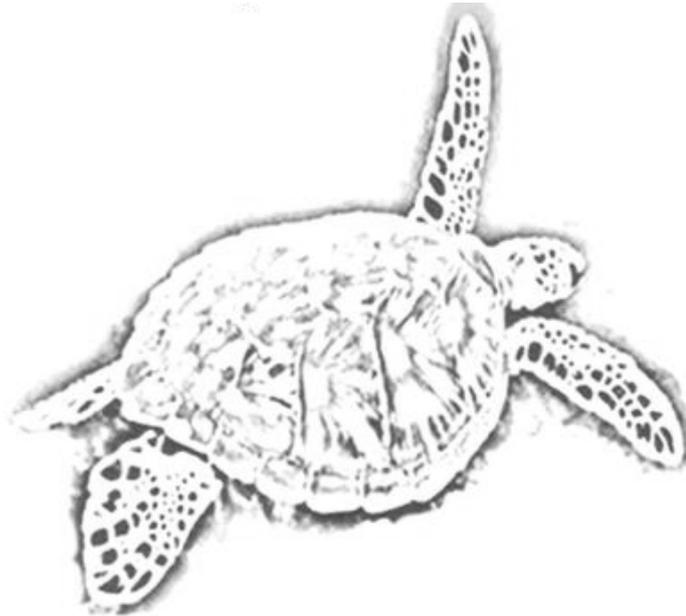


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PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON THE INTERACTION BETWEEN MARINE TURTLES AND FISHERIES IN SYRIA

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INTRODUCTION

Interviewing fishermen is not such a difficult thing and can be a valuable exercise. Meeting with the fishermen is however not enough; to get the information required one must be a psychological expert. Unless you can act like the fishermen, observing their character and psychology, getting to their level, the interviews can be failures receiving wrong or superficial information.

Selecting the fishermen to interview plays a major role. It should be done carefully with a big group, taking age, experience and authority into consideration. It is also important to learn of the various fishing groups in the area and to befriend them all, so none are ostracised.

Meeting with a fisherman or his group (3-4 people) may take a week to achieve successful results. Once they get accustomed to you they are more willing to provide the true information being sought – generally one must show hospitality to the fishermen and alcoholic drinks help! It is a protracted process, but is the best way to obtain accurate and true information from fishermen that is not known or easily observed. In addition, once they come to regard you as a friend, they become more responsive to your ideas and suggestions. They may change their thoughts and habits without hesitation to those which you propose.

“Why do you protect the turtles?”, “How will protecting the turtles benefit me?” and “How can I avoid damage to my nets from turtles?” are some of the questions the fishermen ask and when they receive convincing answers the majority of them respond to reason as they have learned something that was not previously known to them.

This presentation of this project is important in that it concerns the relationship between fishermen and turtles in an area that has an important nesting beach and also important feeding areas.

The Syrian coast of 183km can be generally divided into two parts namely rocky with some short sandy parts from north of Lattakia to the Turkish border and sandy with some short rocky parts from south of Lattakia to the Lebanese border.

In general the coastal waters are not productive (the average yearly catch was only 1961 tonnes at Lattakia for 2000-2003). There are however over 1950 recreational and small fishing boats in addition to commercial vessels, oil tankers and military ships.

The coast is punctuated with villages, towns and cities, all generally within 5-10km of each other, thus there is a high human presence all along the coast and human-turtle interaction is common.

Surveys at Lattakia in 2004 proved that Syria has a regionally important nesting beach for the endangered green turtle but it also brought to light significant numbers of turtles stranded for various reasons and this provided the rationale for starting the current project.

METHODS

From the Summer of 2004 fishing ports and coastal villages from the Turkish border in the north to Jableh further south (covering approximately 80km of coast) was regularly visited in order to enumerate the number and kind of boats present and to interview fishermen for information concerning their interaction with sea turtles.

RESULTS

A total of nine locations with fishing activity were visited and 960 boats recorded. The main results and observations are summarised in Tab. 1. The smallest area (Um Al-toyour) had only 10 boats whereas Al-azhari, a large port north of Lattakia had 383. Between 1 and 38 fishermen were interviewed at each port and the summary of observations and the number of fishermen interviewed are presented in Tab. 2.

Port / site	Number of recreational boats	Number of fishing boats	Total
Al-badrouseih	12	10	22
Ras Al-bassit	26	84	110
Um Al-toyour	5	5	10
Wadi Kandeel	4	8	12
Berj Eslam	6	68	74
Ibn Hani	35	48	83
Al-azhari	68	315	383
Al-kassab	12	38	50
Jableh	36	180	216
Total	204	756	960

Tab.1. Number of fishing and recreational boats per community in the northern part of the Syrian coast, 2004

In some instances fishermen expressed that they valued a kilo of fish over the lives of many turtles and would batter turtles when they encounter them in their nets. Still others indicated that they would injure turtles, leaving them bleeding as they thought that this would make other turtles leave the area.

Direct consumption of turtles is also a problem. Some fishermen drink turtle blood as they believe it is a kind of cancer treatment and they then sell the meat to be consumed (Tab. 2).

Port / site	Fishermen interviews	Importance of the site for marine turtles
Al-badrouseih	1	Sandy/rocky beach. Touristic place. Turtles present in summer and winter for feeding. Low level nesting
Ras Al-bassit	8	Sandy/rocky beach. Turtles present in winter for feeding & summer for low level nesting
Um Al-toyour	1	Sandy/rocky beach. Turtles present in summer. Little nesting.
Wadi Kandeel	2	Sandy/rocky beach. Turtles present in summer. Little nesting.
Berj Eslam	3	Rocky. Turtles present in summer. No nesting weak interaction.
Ibn Hani	12	Archaeological and touristic port, about 6,000 years old. "MAJOR" feeding area, strong interaction with fisheries. People consume turtle meat and blood.
Al-azhari	38	Main port. Turtles present year round for feeding. No nesting. Very strong interaction with fisheries. Fishermen consume turtle meat and blood.
Al-kassab	3	Just south of Lattakia. No nesting. Turtles present only in summer. Strong interaction with fisheries. People consume turtle meat and blood.
Jableh	4	No nesting. Turtles present only in summer. Strong interaction with fisheries. People consume turtle meat and blood.
Total	72	

Tab. 2. Summary of observations and the number of fishermen interviewed per community in the northern part of the Syrian coast, 2004

DISCUSSION

The information obtained from fishermen indicates there is cause for concern for marine turtle populations in Syria with turtles being maimed and killed for both malicious purposes and consumption. It is hard to quantify the level of take, but as the green turtle is critically endangered in the Mediterranean, it is likely that fisheries interaction in Syria is having a significant negative impact on its populations.

The work presented here, concerning having interviews and discussions with fishermen, is part of an ongoing project aimed at raising awareness and sensitising the fishermen to be more respectful to marine turtles and hence reduce the negative impact of fisheries. Fishermen are the main stakeholders, and from their interaction with turtles, they know a lot about turtle ecology; something that would otherwise take years of hard research to reproduce. Consequently their understanding and co-operation is imperative for the proper protection of the animals.

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