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Zakynthos 1990: An Update on the Public Awareness Programme

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Zakynthos, a small island 11 miles off the west coast of Peloponnesus, Greece, supports the most important rookery for the marine turtle *Caretta caretta* in the Mediterranean region. Systematic monitoring since the late 1970's has shown that 1,000 to 2,000 nests, depending on the season, are recorded on the 3.5 km of sandy beach within the Bay of Laganas, located on the south coast of the island. Zakynthos, once a quiet island catering to a few Greek visitors, has recently become a prime tourist resort. In 1990, 1,186 chartered flights, mainly from the U. K. and Germany, flew 151,687 visitors to the island, a 30% increase over 1989. The Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece (STPS), which has been carrying out a monitoring programme on Zakynthos since 1983, launched a Public Awareness Campaign in 1987 with the support of WWF and others in an attempt to minimize disturbances caused by these tourists to nesting turtles. By 1988, STPS had established two Information Stations, one on Gerakas beach and one on Laganas beach, to distribute information by means of leaflets and colloquy. Both stations attracted thousands of concerned tourists while, at the same time, slide shows and lectures were successfully arranged in collaboration with hoteliers and tour representatives to stress the needs of the nesting turtles and hatchlings.

In 1987, a Ministerial Decision demarcated a Housing Control Zone along the nesting beaches in which development was strictly regulated. This legislation, being a product of national lobbying and international pressure, infuriated local landowners who looked to tourist development as an easy and lucrative enterprise. The government, despite promises, failed in the years that followed to compensate the affected people and hence exacerbated their negative attitude toward measures dealing with the protection of sea turtles. During the summer of 1990, the situation reached a critical point when local indignation turned to violence against STPS volunteers. The reaction was evoked largely in response to the fact that the existing Ministerial Decision assumed the stronger status of a Presidential Decree shortly before the beginning of the nesting season. This thwarted the expectations of a small group of disgruntled landowners who had hoped that protective measures would be abolished. To further complicate the situation, local landowners and others claiming to have been adversely affected by the Presidential Decree put on an ecological mask and formed a society (called ZEMELDIKA) to "protect" sea turtles. This new society refused any collaboration with STPS, and once again the latter served as a buffer for both the fury of the landowners and the impotence of the central government to call for a Management Plan.

Tensions escalated and the violence eventually left three volunteers (two Greek and one British) hospitalized after being assaulted by members of ZEMELDIKA and their sympathizers. Threats and abuses continued to accompany researchers during their daily duties on the nesting beaches and, as a result, the Information Station at Gerakas became inoperative. The ongoing controversy rendered sea turtle conservation in Zakynthos an issue of international appeal. More than 100 volunteers, of which 50% were Greek and the rest from 15 different countries (U. K., Germany, USA, New Zealand, Czechoslovakia, Brazil, etc.), participated in the 1990 STPS program. Despite requests by STPS, local authorities refused to cover the smooth execution of the project and turned a blind eye to all illegal activities (constructions and umbrellas on nesting beaches, etc.). However, despite all the problems, the beach was regularly visited by STPS in order to monitor nesting activity and, several times in conjunction with the "Zakynthian Ecological Movement", informative material was distributed to beach users.

As the violence grew stronger, so did national and international support. Zakynthos once again became the most popular conservation site in Greece, drawing the attention of domestic and international mass media. Articles featured in local newspapers and local radio stations regularly interviewed STPS members on Zakynthos. Hundreds of letters of protest addressed to the Prime Minister, the Ministry of the Environment, and the Greek National Tourist Organization arrived from around the world to express the concern of tourists who realized that this unique rookery was gradually being destroyed. The Information Station of Laganas became a focal point for conservation; more than 30,000 tourists visited the Station and 10,000 information leaflets in three languages were distributed. A petition signed by 7,000 tourists called for the Greek Government to act immediately for the protection of sea turtles on Zakynthos. More than 6,000 handouts, co-signed by STPS and the "Zakynthian Ecological Movement", reached every single home in the town of Zakynthos. Ninety slide shows were organized throughout the season, at six hotels and a cruiser, in collaboration with hoteliers and Tour Reps; these were attended by over 6,000 spectators.

Meanwhile, during the breeding season (June-August), the Bay of Laganas was teeming with sea turtles, offering visitors stupendous sightings. Keen swimmers had the opportunity to read the tag numbers of turtles and in turn report this to the Information Station. During the hatching period many tourists stood by the Beach Hatchery at dawn to observe hatchlings head off to the sea. Since this was facilitated by the easy access to the Hatchery, on-site instructions describing how not to disturb the hatchlings were readily distributed by the project members. This resulted in creating a network of knowledgeable "hatchling watchers" who both guarded and reported disturbances to hatchlings. In this way, tourists were not simply passive spectators; many became active supporters in terms of helping with leaflet distribution, working at the Information Station, and reporting disturbances of nesting sites. After eight years of persistent work, the majority of local people have realized that the motto "WE CAN ALL LIVE TOGETHER" can indeed become a reality from which both man and turtles may benefit. To this end, STPS has been promoting the following:

1. Immediate land acquisition of a core area which hosts over 60% of total nesting in the Bay of Laganas.
2. Completion of a Management Plan to determine land use in the protected area and establish the foundations for a Marine Park.
3. Establishment of a Marine Park which will include:
 - a. full protection of sea turtles on land and at sea,
 - b. full protection of the nesting beaches, and
 - c. steady income for local communities and landowners that have been adversely affected by existing building restrictions.

In addition, the following should become effective immediately:

1. Proper enforcement of existing legislation concerning protection of nesting areas.
2. Proper safeguarding of nesting beaches at night, by trained wardens.
3. Minimize light and noise pollution.
4. Continue Monitoring Programme.
5. Continue Public Awareness Programme.