

Marine Turtle Newsletter

Sea Turtle Conservation Problems on Crete and the Need for Long-Term Planning

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The 1993 monitoring programme in Rethymnon, Crete, began on 25 May. The nesting beach extends 11 km eastward from the town of Rethymnon to Skaleta Beach. After setting up the makeshift camp at Sfakaki the first of the international volunteers began to trickle in, awaiting the arrival of the first female loggerhead sea turtles (*Caretta caretta*) on the beaches. Just two weeks later the wait was over, as on the evening of 9 June two turtles came in and laid their eggs in the sand. Within two weeks the number had climbed to 40. In addition to the monitoring work a public awareness programme was initiated with slide shows in major hotels, a portable kiosk, and the use of the tourist office as an information outlet. This year also saw the initiation of daily beach guarding at Skaleta Beach where protective cages were regularly interfered with last year. It is hoped that our increased presence on this beach will put an end to this happening.

It was clear from the outset that the extent of the problems facing turtles in 1993 had greatly increased over previous years. In addition to the proliferation of new buildings, many of which are illegal, more areas of the beach have fallen under the shadow of sunbeds and umbrellas. Furthermore, eastwards along the beach from Platania to Adele much of the sand on what was one of the most important and successful nesting areas since 1990, had been bulldozed to the back of the beach as "protection" for new rows of exotic species of palm trees which had, not surprisingly, died last year and been replanted over the winter. In addition, large sections of this same stretch of beach which hosts some of the more prestigious hotels have suffered criss-crossing of yet more bulldozers which are involved in the construction of even more hotels and apartments. Fortunately, this activity did not result in the loss of nests in 1993, due to the placement of a conspicuous cage over every located nest and close cooperation with the hoteliers and the bulldozer owners.

On Sfakaki Beach further to the east, which is the most important nesting site in the Rethymnon area and the location of two beach hatcheries, the situation has also deteriorated. Until this year the beach had remained one of the least disturbed as far as tourist development goes. However, there are now over 50 sunbeds and umbrellas sited in this area, and indeed some sunbeds had to be moved in order to find a suitable location for the hatchery. New apartment buildings have been built at the end of the beach and if this process continues, the beach will no longer be able to support a viable nesting population. With its demise may go the rest of the Cretan population.

It is at Skaleta Beach, however, that the turtles are really being thrown up against the worst excesses of the tourist phenomenon. Last year, nearly 40% of the nests had to be removed to beach hatcheries. There has been an increase in the number of umbrellas, photo-seeking tourists, and lights from hotels and tavernas. In response to the deteriorating situation, intensive nocturnal safeguarding was carried out by Sea Turtle Protection Society volunteers. During the 1993 nesting season, 65 nests were made on this 400 m stretch of beach of which over 50% had to be translocated to a hatchery set up on a nearby nesting beach. Nesting success at Skaleta was a mere 16.8% (65 of 385 emergences resulted in egg-laying), compared to an overall 24.6% recorded on all the nesting beaches (i.e., the entire 11 km). Hatching success at Skaleta was 56.7% (based on post-hatching excavation of 17 nests), quite low compared to the average hatching success (62.7%, n=134 nests) for all the beaches.

On a more positive note, this year we established contact with a newly formed student ecological group from the University of Rethymnon. Following an initial meeting, 13 students came and helped us with a beach clean-up at Sfakaki Beach. We later made a slide presentation to the group which about 25 people attended. Since then some of the students have been helping with the night surveys and participating in the awareness programme. A meeting with the manager of Rithymna Beach Hotel also proved quite promising, with an agreement to limit their use of a bulldozer for cleaning the beach. Also, the manager said that we were free to move any umbrellas which shaded nests and furthermore we put covers on their bright roof lights to reduce their glare upon the beach. Perhaps if other managers were so cooperative, more could be done to conserve the turtles.

In addition to the project at Rethymnon, a monitoring programme has been established at Tavronitis to monitor the beach west of Chania. Although we have expanded both the monitoring and public awareness programmes this year in an attempt to protect as many nests as possible, and the team of volunteers remains as enthusiastic and committed as ever, we really feel that we need some sort of long-term plan or framework for the future. It seems that despite our strenuous

efforts each year, the pace of development continues unabated and we believe that unless drastic measures are taken soon to offer some protection for the nesting areas then the very future of the sea turtles nesting on the island of Crete is at stake.

It is clear that we must build on the interest shown by the Municipality of Rethymnon, the communities and the major hotels of the area in the protection of turtles here. We must strengthen our links with our contacts and start discussing a plan for the way forward. It is not enough to have ad-hoc improvements here and there, when what we really need is an overall strategy for tackling problems such as light pollution, vehicular use of the beach, and most importantly the need for some areas of protection where development is precluded. Two areas in particular are crying out for protection -- the beach at Sfakaki and the area east of Platanias River as far as Platanias. This would ensure at least some areas of safety for turtles, without which we will undoubtedly witness the further deterioration of the beaches culminating in the extinction of the Cretan population.