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PROCEEDINGS OF THE TWELFTH ANNUAL WORKSHOP ON SEA TURTLE BIOLOGY AND CONSERVATION

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Compilers:
James I. Richardson
Thelma H. Richardson



U.S. Department of Commerce
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
Southeast Fisheries Science Center
75 Virginia Beach Drive
Miami, FL 33149

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ASPECTS OF SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN GREECE WITH EMPHASIS ON THE ISLAND OF ZAKYNTHOS

Dimitrios Dimopoulos

The Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece Solomou 35, GR-106 82 ATHENS, Greece

The extensive coastline of Greece (approx. 15,000 km) hosts the most important loggerhead sea turtle nesting areas in the Mediterranean. Of these, Zakynthos constitutes the single largest rookery with about 1,800 nests (in a "good" season) on 3.5 km of beach length. The Bay of Kiparissia in western Peloponnesus hosts about 600 nests on a total of 44 km (Margaritoulis, 1988). During 1990 and 1991 the STPS completed a survey of almost all of the Greek coastline in search of new nesting areas. Turtle nesting was recorded in several localities, Crete being the most important one with an estimated 800 nests (Margaritoulis et al., in press).

The island of Zakynthos remains the focal point for sea turtle conservation efforts in the Mediterranean. In Greece it epitomizes the conflict between coastal development at any cost and nature preservation. To protect this unique habitat, the Greek government introduced legislation in 1984 to regulate human activities on land and at sea. But this proved to be ineffective, as restrictive measures were coupled with the incompetence of the authorities to enforce legislation and a reluctance to provide alternatives for the affected landowners.

Zakynthos has become in the last few years a major tourist destination. In 1991 alone, 1,257 chartered flights transferred 181,432 tourists, a 20% increase compared with 1990, of whom over 40% stayed on resorts bordering the nesting beaches. Thus, STPS with the support of the EEC and WWF, initiated a Public Awareness Programme in 1987 mainly through Information Stations, slide shows in hotels, and informative beach patrols. The establishment in 1991 of a branch office in the main town of Zakynthos contributed to the promotion of public awareness throughout the whole year. The objectives of this programme are to raise awareness among tourists, to minimize disturbances to turtles and hatchlings, to increase local participation and to campaign for the establishment of a National Marine Park (Dimopoulos, 1991).

During the 1991 season, over 40,000 tourists visited the two Information Stations and 12,069 visitors (23.4% more than 1990) attended the 147 slide shows (63% more than 1990) held regularly in the major hotels of the area. The Information Stations were erected with the consensus and support of the local Communities, and the slide shows were conducted in cooperation with the hotel owners and managers.

Protection efforts on the nesting beaches at night with wardens hired by the Prefecture of Zakynthos would have been more effective if the wardens had received proper training. STPS volunteers assisted Port Police with guarding the seaside access to the East Laganas beach. Data collected from 4 July through 31 August 1991 demonstrate that 1,017 individuals, representing 3% of the total number of tourists staying on the nearby resorts of Kalamaki and Laganas, attempted to trespass at night on this restricted beach. On the other hand, an increase in nesting activity in this area, recorded during the last years, is attributed to the minimization of human interference which comes as a result of intensive education and the close cooperation with the neighbouring hotel owner.

The growing local concern for the conservation of Zakynthos nesting areas was made public for the first time in a common declaration signed by three local communities with access to the nesting areas, the Local Union of Municipalities and Communities of Zakynthos, the Hoteliers Association of Zakynthos, the Zakynthian Ecological Movement and the STPS. All signatories agreed that stronger pressure needs to be exerted on the government to compensate the aggrieved landowners and to proceed with the establishment of a National Marine Park that will protect the sea turtle habitat.

It is a fact that a large portion of the local population has realized that sea turtle conservation and the protection of the environment need not conflict with their interests but, on the contrary, may offer long term and viable options for a rational development. This definite change in attitude was expressed in a massive local demonstration that thwarted attempts to develop on the islet of Marathonissi, one of the protected nesting beaches. The demonstration was attended by the Mayor of Zakynthos, the local MP, representatives of the Church, the Local Communities, the Hotel Owners and many local organizations.

Furthermore, there has been great progress with the planned acquisition by WWF of a large plot of land backing Sekania beach which hosts over 50% of all nests in the Bay of Laganas. This will have a positive impact on the other landowners who have been waiting desperately and long for a solution to their problem. It is worth mentioning that this is the first time ever in Greece that land has been purchased for the purpose of protecting an endangered species' habitat. After the acquisition, Sekania may become the core area in the proposed National Marine Park.

LITERATURE CITED

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