

Back to the Old Ways

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Laganas Bay on Zakynthos Island (Greece) holds, by far, the largest nesting aggregation of loggerhead turtles in the Mediterranean Sea. The nesting habitat, comprising six beaches totaling 5.5 km in length, has been systematically monitored since 1984 by ARCHELON, the Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece. An average of 1300 nests per season (nesting density: 236 nests/km), of which 79% hatch, provide an average of 80,000 viable hatchlings annually. Laganas Bay is also a major tourist destination and this creates several problems on nesting and hatching.

The Greek state since 1983 has taken several legislative measures to safeguard the nesting beaches and the inter-nesting habitat, but enforcement has always been very poor, mainly due to the reaction of landowners and developers. Nevertheless, two great steps have been so far made, following long-standing pressures from NGOs and international bodies. The first step was the acquisition, by WWF Greece, of a tract of land behind Sekania, the beach that hosts more than 50% of nests, hence providing a nesting refuge devoid of any development. The second step was the creation of a National Marine Park in Laganas Bay and, more importantly, the establishment of a locally based Management Agency comprising representatives from the Ministry of Environment, regional government, local communities and environmental organizations. This was a striking novelty for Greece; until then enforcement of regulations in protected areas was assigned to existing local authorities, that never took this additional role seriously.

The Management Agency, under the chairmanship of Prof. Yiannis Pantis, gained ground little by little and, after four years of intense efforts, its voice started to be heard in the local society; it employed permanent staff and many seasonal wardens, it established partnerships with local stakeholders, it oversaw application of legislation and made necessary recommendations to the local authorities and the Ministry of Environment. For those familiar with nature protection in Greece, these humble steps are considered groundbreaking accomplishments in the field of managing protected areas.

Unfortunately, this year the funds provided by the Ministry of Environment were discontinued and the Management Agency ceased to operate. The Park staff is on strike, no wardens have been hired to patrol the nesting beaches, no information outlets have been set up for visitors, and illegal activities are again flourishing. As a result, the current state of the nesting beaches is the worst since the Park began operating.

However, ARCHELON is on Zakynthos, running its monitoring and public awareness project for the 21st consecutive year. The project commenced on 3 May and field stations were established on 17 May. Over 120 volunteers from all over the world are expected to participate. Nesting began on 6 June and so far approximately 450 nests have been recorded. However, with no wardening and no Park staff, it is a very tough summer. ARCHELON this year is obliged to revert to its pre-Park ways of operating where it tried to keep some control by monitoring and protecting nests, by appealing to authorities for illegalities, and by informing tourists, boat owners and hotel managers.

It is imperative that the Ministry of Environment immediately provides the necessary funds for the operation of the Management Agency, which is the only feasible solution towards the long-term protection of this very important area. ARCHELON believes that what is happening this season on Zakynthos is just the “missing year” of the operation of the Park and that the future will be more promising. We are committed to working harder toward this goal.