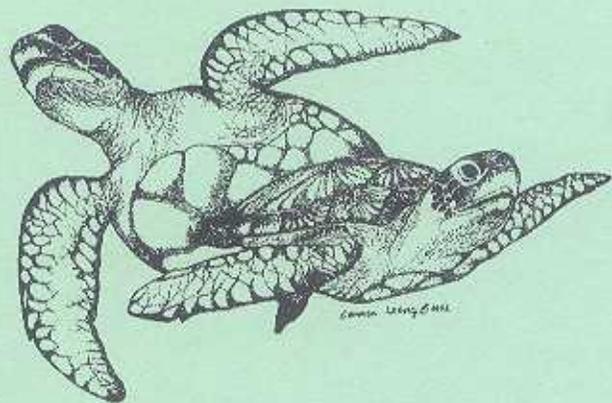




**PROCEEDINGS
OF THE TWENTY-THIRD ANNUAL
SYMPOSIUM ON SEA TURTLE BIOLOGY
AND CONSERVATION**



**“Living with
Turtles”**

17 to 21 March 2003, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Compiled by: Nicolas J. Pilcher

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
Southeast Fisheries Science Center
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TOUR OPERATORS: A POTENTIAL ALLY IN THE PROTECTION OF SEA TURTLE NESTING HABITATS. THE CASE OF CRETE, GREECE *

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Introduction

Crete is the 5th largest island in the Mediterranean, situated in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Three important nesting sites for loggerhead sea turtles were discovered on the island: Rethymno, the Bay of Chania and the Bay of Messara (Margaritoulis et al., 1992) and they have since been monitored by ARCHELON, the Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece.

With more than 2.6 million visitors per year, Crete is also one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Mediterranean. The dominant type of tourism is package holidays, regulated by tour operator companies. Tourism on the island is concentrated on the coasts and has a strong seasonal character, since 92% of the total activity takes place between May and October, coinciding with the sea turtle nesting season (Data GNTO, 2003). All three nesting sites are under pressure due to intense tourist development (Panagopoulou & Dimopoulos, in press). With the completion in 1997 of a LIFE-Nature Project, co-funded by the European Union, a Management Plan was compiled aiming to:

1. Mitigate the effect of tourist development on the nesting sites, thus ensuring their viability for the future;
2. Ensure that all future development will have minimal impact on the nesting habitats; and
3. Achieve the above through cooperation with the local community, the local authorities and the tourism industry (Irvine et al., 1998).

This paper presents ARCHELON's cooperation with tour operator companies on Crete, analysing the strategy used to approach them and the major outcomes of this cooperation.

Methods

Why would a tour operator company wish to contribute to conservation? The environment is perceived as one of the main reasons why people choose an area for their holidays. Tour operator companies acknowledge the fact that tourism has a negative impact on the local environment, therefore by minimising that impact, they protect the quality of their tourist product and ensure that each destination will continue to appeal to their clients in the future. Moreover they gain a competitive advantage differentiating their product.

As a result, most of the tour operator companies have established Environmental Departments that promote environmentally friendly policies, support local conservation work, and urge their clients as well as the resorts they cooperate with to follow their example. According to the results derived by questionnaires filled in by the hotels as well as clients, tour operators such as Hotelplan, TUI and Kuoni reward hotels for their conservation achievements.

Tour operator companies have also formed partnerships to promote sustainable development, committing themselves to minimising the impact of tourism on the environment. Such partnerships include the Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development, supported by UNEP, UNESCO and the World Tourism Organisation, as well as the "Declaration of Crete" signed in 1999 by the Swiss Federation of Travel Agencies.

Who to approach? Most European tour operators belong to larger, multi-national companies, even though they maintain some degree of independence. Environmental Departments are usually answerable directly to the Board of Directors of the parent company. Each of these companies has a head office in the tourist destination, and may have one or more local offices, responsible for the area's tourist businesses.

ARCHELON's cooperation with tour operators invariably starts with contacting the Head of the Environmental Department. Once an agreement is reached, the local offices and businesses implement it. In other cases, tour operators express interest following recommendation by businesses ARCHELON is already working with, as was the case with Grecotel and TUI. In most cases however, the first contact is made at the level of the local offices first, before moving on to the destination head office and from there to the Environmental Department.

How can tour operators support sea turtle conservation on Crete? Tour operators can act as intermediaries between ARCHELON and the tourists. By providing information about sea turtles in the brochures prepared for Crete, including information on their

web sites or printing leaflets, they play a key role in raising awareness among tourists about sea turtles. Tour operators can also inform their clients at welcome meetings held upon their arrival to Crete.

Tour operators can also use their influence to apply pressure for the protection of the sea turtle nesting habitats of Crete. This is usually done by writing letters to the authorities asking for ARCHELON's management proposals to be implemented, asking hotels to improve their policies for the benefit of sea turtles and intervening on any management issues that arise.

Tour operators can support ARCHELON financially either directly in the form of beach or hatchery sponsorships, or indirectly by recommending ARCHELON's work to their clients or other companies they work with.

Results

ARCHELON cooperates with the major tour operator companies that account for more than half the tourists that visit Crete (1.7 million people). These include TUI GROUP, TUI Nordic, TUI Netherlands, Finnmatkat, Hotelplan, Apollo, PURE CRETE and Kuoni. In the last five years, these cooperations have produced significant results:

1. Raising Awareness about Sea Turtles

- TUI, Hotelplan, PURE CRETE and Apollo include information about sea turtles in the brochures prepared for Crete. The total number of brochures exceeds 10,000,000 copies per year
- Hotelplan have issued 300,000 leaflets for distribution to their clients at welcome meetings
- TUI, Hotelplan and PURE CRETE include information about ARCHELON on their web sites
- Tour representatives trained by ARCHELON include information about sea turtles at their client's welcome meetings.

As a result of the above, the total number of people informed since 1998 exceeds 2.5 million people. It is estimated that one out of four visitors to Crete during 2003 (650,000 people) will have received information about sea turtles prior to or upon their arrival to the island.

2. Lobbying for the implementation of ARCHELON's management proposals - TUI, TUI Nordic and Apollo send letters to all hotels they cooperate with asking them to implement ARCHELON's management proposals. In 2000, TUI sent a letter to all the local authorities of Crete, as well as the Regional Office, the Greek National Tourism Office and the Ministry of Environment requiring information on the status of sea turtle conservation on Crete. All recipients contacted ARCHELON for advice on how to reply to this letter, and have since made more of an effort to cooperate.

Tour Operators have intervened on beach management issues in favour of ARCHELON. For example, in 2000 a hotel dug a 1,500m trench along the beach in order to connect its sewage system to that of a neighbouring hotel. ARCHELON's immediate reaction combined with an intervention by TUI resulted in the pipe being removed and the beach restored to its original condition at the expense of the hotel involved.

3. Supporting ARCHELON's work - In 1994, ARCHELON received TUI's Environmental Award for "ten years of persistent efforts in the areas of environmental education, public awareness, monitoring, rescue and rehabilitation of sea turtles at Greek coastal areas". ARCHELON's project of Crete covers 30% of its running costs through beach and hatchery sponsorships from tour operators. The Prince Bernhard Foundation supported ARCHELON's environmental education Programme for one year following a recommendation made by TUI Nordic Hotels that used to be skeptical towards ARCHELON are now models of cooperation thanks to the intervention of Tour Operators. A hotel in Chania rapidly changed their attitude towards ARCHELON when they were informed of its cooperation with two of their major clients, Hotelplan and TUI Nordic.

Conclusions

Tour Operators can be important allies for the conservation of sea turtle nesting habitats on Crete by helping to reduce the negative impact of tourism on the local environment and by acting as intermediaries between ARCHELON and the tourists.

Furthermore, ARCHELON's cooperation with tour operators has increased support among the local community who no longer perceive the existence of sea turtles as an obstacle to their prosperity.

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TURTLES IN THE CARIBBEAN OVERSEAS TERRITORIES (TCOT): A SUMMARY OF PROGRESS

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The exploitation of marine turtles in the Caribbean has generated an extraordinary level of international concern in recent years. Consequently, the CITES Hawksbill Turtle Range State Dialogue Process has led to a general agreement among Range States to work towards a regional management strategy for the hawksbill turtle in the Caribbean.

In line with recommendations made through the Dialogue process, the UK Government has commissioned a three-year project to address critical gaps in the knowledge of marine turtle populations found in the UK Overseas Territories. The project, known as TCOT (Turtles in the Caribbean Overseas Territories), was launched in November 2001 and aims to assess the status and exploitation of the marine turtle populations found in Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Montserrat and Turks and Caicos Islands.

TCOT is coordinated by the Marine Turtle Research Group, University of Wales, Swansea and the Marine Conservation Society (MCS), in association with the Cayman Island Department of Environment, the Cayman Turtle Farm, University of Wales, Cardiff and the University of Western Ontario. TCOT relies heavily on a partnership approach and is conducting research in collaboration with project partners in each Territory. The research includes nesting beach and foraging site monitoring, genetic stock analysis, PIT and flipper tagging, socio-economic surveys, as well as volunteer programmes involving dive operators and tourists. These research methodologies were standardised between the Territories at a TCOT training workshop attended by the project partners and held in Grand Cayman in August 2002.

The data collected from the research programmes will be analysed to form the basis of a series of Territory-specific reports, which will provide an up to date status evaluation of marine turtle populations and will include recommendations for future marine turtle management and research in each Territory. These recommendations will be submitted to the Territory governments and the UK Government in October 2004 in order to inform their positions with respect to the CITES Hawksbill Turtle Range State Dialogue Process.