

# Status of leatherback turtles in Djibouti

## 1. Introduction

Djibouti has a coastline of 372 km which is often fringed by extensive reefs and limiting to leatherback turtle nesting. The north coast near Eritrea at Ras Bir which faces the Straits of Bab al-Mandab is generally shallow and sandy. Djibouti is home to a unique assemblage of marine diversity, and ecologically, the confluence of warm-water tropical biota (from the Indian Ocean and Red Sea), with cold water up-welling habitats (from the Somali and Arabian regions) resembles marine conditions seen in only a few other parts of the world.

## 2. The legal protection status for leatherback turtles

### 2.1 Overview

The Republic of Djibouti is a signatory to the London Convention (modified 1954) which is applicable through National Law No. 64/83; the London Convention (1971) on international compensation funds; the London Convention (1973, modified 1978) and its four annexes; the Brussels Convention (1969) on the intervention at high sea; and the United Nations convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982). The first three were approved by Law No. 94/AN/89 2<sup>o</sup> L in 1989, while the last one was approved by Law in 1985. The Republic of Djibouti is also a signatory to the CITES Convention. Decree 80-62/PR/MCTT of 25 May 1980 provides for the protection of the seabed and the marine fauna, whereby the capture of marine mammals and turtles is illegal, as well as the trade with or export of these animals.

The present fisheries law was drafted before the countries independence, with the exception of some articles, and is part of the Code. Articles 148, 149 and 220 to 225 (enacted by law 212/AN/82), and Articles 16 to 19 of Law No. 52/AN/78 (1979) regulate the fishery. Certain fishing techniques, such as the use of explosives and poisons, are illegal. They determine the conditions for the exploitation of fishery resources including fishing zones and closed seasons. They also include sanctions in case of violation of these regulations by fishermen. The law in Djibouti punishes anyone who catches a turtle with a 50,000 Djibouti franc fine (~USD 300) and six months jail.

### 2.2 Management agencies responsible for marine turtle conservation

At present the number of environmental initiatives in Djibouti is limited. The most important one is a sub-regional contingency plan for the Gulf of Aden developed in 1990. Through this the rules for the management of marine protected areas and the exploitation of reef associated species were issued in 1992 by the Maritime Administration. A number of institutions in Djibouti are involved with coastal and marine area and resource management. These are the Ministry of Agriculture and Hydraulics through the Directorate of Stock-farming and Fisheries; the Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications through its Directorate of Maritime Affairs; the National Office for Tourism, Arts and Crafts; the Presidency of the Republic, through the Institute of Higher Studies, Scientific and Technical Research; the Service for Management and Environment, the Inter-ministerial Co-ordination Commission on the Protection of the Marine Fauna and the Seabed and the National Council of the Sea.

## 3. Nesting populations

No reported or otherwise known records of leatherback turtle nesting exist for Djibouti.

## 4. Foraging populations

### 4.1 Overview

According to fishermen and shell collectors along the coast, who reportedly showed great knowledge about marine turtles, four species of marine turtles can be seen Djibouti's waters: the hawksbill, green, loggerhead and leatherback turtles (Al-Mansi et al. 2003). Thus the leatherback turtle, as would be expected from similar observations along other Red Sea bordering nations, spends at least some time in the waters off Djibouti, but it is unknown whether this is a permanent foraging area or simply a transit area.

No research of any kind takes place on marine turtles at present. A short training session was provided to trainers in 2001 and a follow-up in-country training session for local researchers in 2003, but since that time no focused work has been implemented related to marine turtles. PERSGA sponsored conservation initiatives flourished and were effective for a five-year period during which

funding was on hand, but since the conclusion of the start-up phase, no funds are available to conduct research or conservation activities for marine turtles. Records exist for four tagged turtles (two from Sri Lanka, one from Oman and one from Socotra) being recovered in Djibouti but two of these were green turtles (Sri Lanka) and the other two were loggerhead turtles (Al-Mansi et al. 2003).

#### 4.2 Threats to leatherback turtles

The main threats to turtles in the Republic of Djibouti come from the illegal harvest of marine turtles by fishermen and shell (carapace/scutes) collection despite the legal protection given to the turtles (Al-Mansi et al. 2003). Other current threats to marine life come from the tourism, shipping and coastal development sectors. At present, fisheries are a limited threat.

#### 4.3 Protection of foraging areas

Djibouti has two declared marine protected areas, which have been established for more than ten years: Moucha Territorial Park (1972) and South Mascali Islands Integral Reserve (1980), however these protect habitat that is not thought critical for leatherback turtles. There are two additional areas proposed for protected status, one of which is of regional importance: Godoriya, and Iles des Sept Frères and Ras Siyan, lying at the junction of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This is a group of high-aspect islands and an adjacent coastal stretch with a mangrove-fringed bay.

#### 4.4. Gaps in capacity and requirements for improved conservation

The two major requirements in Djibouti are staff with expertise in turtle biology and ecology, with an understanding of research and monitoring practices, and funding to undertake conservation work. The lack of trained staff stems largely from the lack of a higher education system and the funding avenues for post-graduate study by Djibouti nationals.

Personnel for managing marine resources are lacking, although recently the PERSGA-funded field project and the National Biodiversity Project have initiated training of national counterparts in turtle survey techniques. At present there is no monitoring or conservation program for marine turtles. The Environment Department was created recently (1996) and finalised the National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP) in April 2000 and a National Strategy for Biodiversity Conservation with financial support from the GEF. These include a National Law which will require mandatory Environmental Impact Assessments for all projects concerning the marine environment. It is assumed that with the adoption of the NEAP and Biodiversity Strategy, the Environment Department will be involved in all development projects. There is a need for the managerial staff of the key national institutions to be trained in the basics of the biology and ecology, and conservation needs of marine turtles.

Financial constraints are a major obstacle towards the conservation of marine turtles. There have been no funds for short surveys to assess the status of turtles in Djibouti, except for foreign-based research. The Environment Department has had to rely on GEF and PERSGA financial support to conduct the first assessments of turtles in 2003. The NEAP calls for the creation of an Environmental Fund which should be established in the near future. It is expected that this fund will be used for conservation of key ecosystems and species such as coral reefs and marine turtles.

Finally, there is a general lack of experts at tertiary education levels with knowledge of coral reefs because Djibouti does not have a University. There has been a proposal for the development of a National University, but it will take 5 years or longer before it offers a degree in Marine Biology and Ecology of a post-graduate level. Additionally, there is a proposal to create a Marine Research Institute which will be in charge of conservation of marine ecosystems.

#### **References**

Al-Mansi A, Nasser NA, Aden A (2003) 'The marine turtles in the Republic of Djibouti: their biology and conservation.' PERSGA, Jeddah.