

Status of leatherback turtles in Kenya

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1. The legal protection status for leatherback turtles

1.1 Overview

Kenya is a signatory to international and regional instruments such as CITES, CBD, CMS convention, IOSEA MOU. Leatherbacks are considered critically endangered in Kenya according to the IUCN red list and are protected under national legislation (Fisheries Act- Cap 378 and the Wild Act-Cap 376) which prohibits killing, consumption or sale of all marine turtle species, their eggs and products. Enforcement effort is however hampered due to jurisdictional overlaps (between the Kenya Wildlife Services and the Fisheries Department), reduced manpower capacity and lack of deterrent penalties. There is no legislation protecting key nesting and foraging habitats utilized by marine turtles except for those within marine protected areas (Okemwa et al. 2004).

1.2 Management agency responsible for marine turtle conservation in Kenya

Name of agency: Kenya Wildlife Services

Type of agency: Government Agency

2. Nesting populations

2.1 Overview

The Kenya Sea Turtle Conservation Committee (KESCOM) has been in operation since 1993 and is the umbrella body that coordinates surveys of beaches in Kenya for nesting turtles. KESCOM surveys reveal that three species of marine turtle nest on Kenya's beaches (green, hawksbill and olive ridley turtles). Leatherback turtles have not been recorded nesting in Kenya (Frazier 1975; Okemwa 2002; Okemwa et al. 2004). In addition, KESCOM have established community based turtle conservation groups along the Kenya coast covering over 50% of potential nesting grounds which have led to increased reports of nesting activity and better assessment of nesting trends. However, there are still gaps in the knowledge of nesting turtles, in particular the distribution of nests is less known for sections of the coast where accessibility is poor (e.g. between Malindi and Lamu; Figure 1) (Okemwa 2002; Okemwa et al. 2004). There have been no surveys to identify whether anecdotal or traditional records indicating that leatherback turtles' nest, or have nested, in Kenya.

3. Foraging populations

3.1) Details of leatherback turtle census or tagging results such as tag recovery data.

Aerial surveys in 1994 found that marine turtles are widely distributed along the Kenyan coast (Wamukoya et al. 1996). No foraging area surveys have been carried out on leatherback turtles in Kenya. Sightings are rare because leatherbacks would most probably be sighted in deeper offshore waters and Kenya's artisanal fishers are not equipped to fish in such deep waters. Artisanal fishers comprise approximately 80% of the fleet and contribute approximately 60% of the catch (Okemwa et al. 2004).

3.2) Seasonality of leatherback turtles in coastal and offshore waters

leatherback turtles are most likely to be seen in Kenya's waters between October and March, which is the northeast monsoon season.

3.3) Approximate size range of leatherback turtles

There is only one mortality report sent to KESCOM by a community member who reported a leatherback turtle that was caught by fishermen using large mesh gillnets (used to catch sharks). This leatherback turtle measured 49cm CCL and 47 cm CCW. However KESCOM were unable to gain any photographic confirmation that this animal was a leatherback turtle.

3.4) Information on the diet of leatherback turtles.

There are no data on the diet of leatherback turtles that forage in Kenya's waters.

3.5) Other biological studies conducted on leatherback turtles in foraging areas.

There is no information available about where leatherbacks prefer to forage in Kenya.

3.6) Threats to foraging populations of leatherback turtles.

There is only one record of leatherback turtles stranding in Kenya (Okemwa et al. 2004). However, threats for foraging turtles are listed in Table 2; with the exception of trawling these threats have not been quantified. Surveys by Mueni and Mwangi (2002) indicate that at least three turtles are caught by trawl nets per fishing day (in the fishing season).

Table 2. Threats to foraging turtles in Kenya

Threats at this site/area	Current occurrence	Historical occurrence & year
Exploitation of live animals at sea	Yes	Yes
Incidental capture in fisheries	Yes	Yes
Boat strikes	NA	NA
Plastics (at sea)	Yes	NA
Industrial effluent	NA	NA
Inshore oil pollution	Yes	NA
Natural threats/predation	Yes	Yes

3.7) Fisheries bycatch of leatherback turtles and the fisheries involved

Type of fishery	Season of operation	Approx number of boats/operators	Impact – low, medium or high
Artisanal gill net (large mesh) fisheries	October to March	Unknown	Low

3.8) Other activities being undertaken to improve the conservation of leatherback turtle foraging populations.

The Kenya Sea Turtle Conservation Committee (KESCOM), the national coordinating body, was set up to coordinate monitoring and surveillance of nesting beaches and to implement the national marine turtle recovery action plan. KESCOM collaborates with government agencies (including Kenya Wildlife Services, Fisheries Department and Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute), non governmental organizations, fishing communities, hoteliers and conservationists) to advocate for marine turtle conservation. Community based turtle conservation groups have been established along the Kenya coast covering over 50% of potential nesting grounds which have led to increased reports of nesting activity and better assessment of nesting trends. KESCOM carries out targeted awareness activities (training workshops, production of brochures and posters, news articles etc). The conservation of foraging leatherback populations lags behind other marine turtle species, mainly because leatherback observations/strandings are rare in Kenya. However gear regulations on TED usage have been gazetted to reduce bycatch in prawn trawlers. Intense awareness campaigns among fishing communities is also being undertaken by KESCOM. KESCOM has also succeeded in building up conservation action among the relevant government agencies and is advocating for a policy review on marine turtle conservation guided by findings of research and monitoring activities. A marine turtle recovery action plan for Kenya has also been published (Wamukoya et al. 1997).

4. Concluding remarks

Generally, little information is known about the status of leatherback foraging populations in Kenya. Funding is being sourced to increase mapping, monitoring and surveillance of key foraging grounds and to increase tagging of foraging turtles. There is need to build capacity especially in the use of satellite telemetry which will aid in identifying critical foraging grounds and leatherback migratory pathways as well as provide the supportive evidence needed to influence our national policy as regards the conservation of key turtle foraging grounds. (nb: only one unconfirmed incidental capture has been reported to KESCOM within the Pemba channel next to the Tanzanian border of the southcoast of Kenya in October 2004).

5. References

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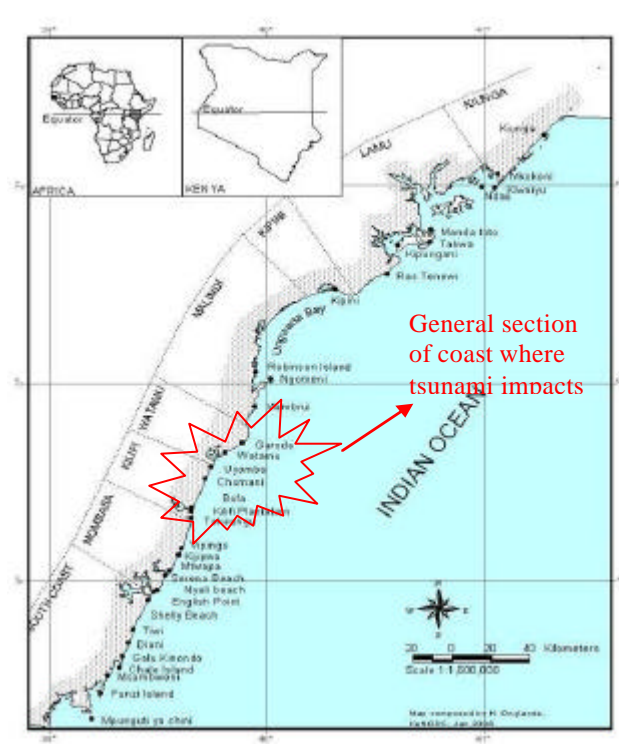


Figure 1. Map of Kenya coast showing identified turtle nesting sites and the section of coast where impacts from the tsunami were felt.