

FEATURE

The message is loud and clear: our ocean turtles and those that often migrate from the coast of Australia to visit us are in danger of extinction. It's time we got together to save them. Community Centred Conservation (C3), a marine research and conservation organization, and other stakeholders, including the Ministry of Environment, are already working hard on the project but they also need public support.

By Hamish Ramdharry

Turtles in danger



Stakeholders say environment degradation has seriously hampered the country's flora and fauna as well as living creatures in the rivers, streams and the ocean. The harm caused so far is quite significant, they say, and because of that there's no time to waste. There's need for a more effective, efficient and concerted national policy on the whole issue.

Some groups like the C3 are already gearing their attention towards the sea turtles that have been nearly wiped off the nature scene.

Dr Henri Agathe of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) Unit, explains that the quality of our lagoons is largely at fault for the disappearance of turtles in our waters. "Sewerage water and heavy aquatic activity in our waters is causing this. We need to improve our marine life and it is only then that things will get better," he says.

A Ministry of Environment spokesperson is optimistic that the decline will be reversed as he notes that there are a number of areas where turtles have been spotted. "This shows that we are doing the right things in terms of lagoon improvement. The Ministry of Environment has banned sand extraction and also has a control on coastal development and this is bearing fruits, Mauritius is on their migratory route. They leave Australia, transit in Mauritius and head to Zanzibar. Turtles eat fish and fish eat corals. If we don't have corals then obviously we have a problem," he says.

Resolutions

Ministry sources point out that there are many mechanisms and legal provisions in place for turtle protection.

Indian Ocean South East Asian (IOSEA) resolutions at a third Meeting of the Signatory States, including Mauritius, adopted two resolutions aimed at raising the profile of turtle conservation issues in the Indian Ocean.

Resolution 3.1 urges the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) and its member States to address marine turtle by-catch issues within the IOSEA region. Resolution 3.2 urges States and organisations involved in reconstruction and rehabilitation activities to be guided by sound principles of sustainable fisheries and integrated coastal zone management, and to take into account



impacts on marine turtles.

Community Centred Conservation (C3) is currently collecting data to find out about the status and distribution of sea turtles in Mauritian waters as little information exists on these ancient mariners due to a lack of research. "Using a community-based approach: local people, such as fishermen and divers as well as the public at large, can help us to discover where and when sea turtles nested in the past and what threats they are facing today," says Patricia Davis, Head of C3. She points out that many Mauritians have a lack of marine knowledge and it plays against

them when it comes to understanding sea wildlife. "The sea has a lot of fundamental resources and if people understood that then they would realise how fragile it is. Not just because we can't see beneath the sea, doesn't mean that it is not there," she says.

Do not disturb

She explains that any slight disturbance such as an engine purring or bright lights dazzle their eyes and force them back into the dark sea, exhausted and postponing their need to lay a heavy load of eggs for another night. "This is a sight rarely witnessed in Mauritius today but it used to be commonplace when the island was once an earthly paradise for marine and land animals. After years of

being exploited by humans for their eggs and meat and caught in commercial fishing nets and lines, all five species of sea turtles that occur in the western Indian Ocean are threatened with extinction; it is estimated that only 1 hatchling in 1000 will survive," she says.

The most common species that are present in the lagoon waters of Mauritius are the Green and the Hawksbill turtle, but despite feeding on the sea-grass beds and coral reefs around our island, they no

longer come ashore to lay their eggs as they once did in the past. "Increasing numbers of hotels, water sports and aquatic activities are pushing them away. This is why we need the help of the public. Once we build up a picture of the key habitats they depend on for both food and reproduction, we can start to protect remaining sites and possibly rehabilitate old ones that are no longer used. For example, beaches that are brightly lit due to the presence of hotels, are known to repel turtles, although it is believed that they instinctively need to return to lay their eggs on the shores where they themselves hatched more than twenty years earlier," she says.

Tourist attraction

By reducing noise and lighting on beaches, turtles can be re-encouraged to nest. This also benefits people, as tourists and locals alike can marvel at the female turtle digging a chamber in the sand, laying her eggs and

then painstakingly covering the nest up by tossing sand over it with her flippers. "There is nothing more exciting than watching tiny turtles emerge from their nests and hurry down the beach to reach the waves and not surprisingly, in Comoros and Seychelles communities have built up lucrative enterprises based on this incredible reproductive cycle. In Mauritius, encouraging turtles to nest again on our shores would not only mean a great victory for conservationists, but could also represent an opportunity for tourist operators to gain international recognition for their efforts in preserving endangered species which were once abundant on this 'paradise'

island," says Patricia.

She also appeals to the public, especially fishermen, to contribute to the Turtle Nest Appeal by providing information on any places where turtles used to nest and pass on the message to friends and family. "Many people blame fishermen for the destruction of lagoons, but this is not entirely true. Actually they know so much about the sea and we can learn a lot from them. If someone wishes to personally make a contribution to conservation or wants to engage his business in a corporate social responsibility project, he can consider joining our "Adopt a turtle" programme. By choosing to adopt, your contribution will directly benefit research, conservation, protection,

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