

EDITORIAL

Up until now Wildlife Middle East News has focused on terrestrial wildlife and conservation issues. This issue is exclusively devoted to marine life, making the editors feel a little like fish out of water themselves! We extend our thanks to Nick Pilcher from the Marine Research Foundation who has provided the exceptional cover image of a turtle for this issue. The editors were fortunate to hear Nick Pilcher speak earlier this year when he visited Dubai and gave a passionate talk on the biology and conservation of turtles at the offices of the World Wide Fund for Nature.

Turtles are the 'charismatic megafauna' of the marine world and as Nick discusses in his inspiring article on the opposite page, given their captivating nature they can be used as a catalyst to spur conservation and awareness action among local communities and their leaders. In her article on the activities of EWS-WWF Rashmi DeRoy gives an overview of the efforts that these organisations are making to protect the marine environment of the UAE.

But while turtles can spur conservation initiatives, not all initiatives to 'help' turtles end up being helpful. Intervention such as the head-starting project for hawksbill turtles described on page 2 may have been initiated with the best of intentions, but is a project that collects turtle eggs, overstocks rearing facilities, releases the weak and sick turtles and keeps the healthy hatchlings for longer than necessary head-starting or just plain handicapping? Ideally conservation initiatives should follow internationally established guidelines that are science driven rather than sponsor driven.

In our e-announcement we have included recent press releases on regional marine issues. Awareness by the media of the pressures on the marine environment is growing, particularly by the newly launched newspaper from Abu Dhabi, «The National». The Middle East is especially vulnerable to oil spills due to its high level of oil production and transport activities. Indeed oil slicks on the east coast, caused by ships dumping oil and petrochemical waste seem to be an increasingly reported problem. While oiled seabirds and oiled reefs can be invisible to the media (the exceptions being large spills with thousands of animals affected), mildly oiled tourist beaches always hit the headlines and make governments take notice. The negative effects on tourism revenue will hopefully spur the authorities to provide the necessary resources to the coastguards, enabling them to catch ships that illegally dump oil in the sea to save money, instead of bearing the cost of cleaning their tanks when they dock in ports. It is reassuring to know that there are organisations like Sea Alarm that are ready to provide information and assistance to interested parties seeking to increase the level of response preparedness in the Middle East region.

The spectre of 'over-development' and concretification are issues never far from the editorial pen, so it is with pleasure that the editors congratulate the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi who are introducing guidelines to encourage developers and industry to consider the reefs and other habitats. To quote the National paper (<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20080602/NATIONAL/670800541>) *Abu Dhabi and Qatar have the opportunity to avoid repeating the environmental disasters made elsewhere in the Emirates and to genuinely pursue the twin goals of ecologically sustainable development and biodiversity conservation.* It was always puzzling that Palm developer Nakheel announced a 'Think Blue' (http://www.bluecommunities.org/page/think_blue) initiative to consider coastal management about a year after the last bit of coast in Dubai was levelled for development! If anyone can explain this please e-mail the editors!

The future of a healthy tourism industry in the Arabian peninsula depends to a large extent on a healthy marine environment that is endowed with photogenic charismatic species, such

as turtles providing unique wildlife spectacles. Ras Sharma and Jethmun Beach in the Hadhramawt, forms one of the most important nesting areas for marine turtles in Arabia. However, despite it being declared a protected area by the Yemeni government it is worrying to learn from David Stanton that feral dogs are killing so many turtles. This would appear to be an issue that needs to be urgently addressed by the authorities and conservation organisations.

Amongst the gloom and doom it is always good to be able to report good news! Warren Baverstock and colleagues describe the rehabilitation of 'Dibba', a green turtle found with a horrific head injury on a beach in the UAE that was nursed back to health by the aquarium team at the Burj al Arab Hotel, Dubai and that was released with a satellite tag in February, 2008. So on this happy note we end our editorial and wish 'Dibba's' meanderings at http://www.seaturtle.org/tracking/?project_id=55 as he swims around the Indian Ocean.

We'd also like to congratulate Gary Feulner who was presented with the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Annual Prize for Natural History by Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research. This was in recognition of Gary's 25 years painstakingly documenting the plant, insect and animal life of the UAE <http://thenational.ae/article/2008527575969>.

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WILDLIFE MIDDLE EAST NEWS OBJECTIVES

- Raising awareness of environmental and conservation issues affecting wildlife in the Middle East.
- Distributing information to enable better management healthcare and welfare of wildlife.
- Providing a central contact point for practical advice and information on wildlife management in the region.