

RAS SHARMA PROTECTED AREA REMAINS UNPROTECTED

David B. Stanton

Yemeni Leopard Recovery Program, P.O. Box 2002, Sana'a, Republic of Yemen y1rp@yemenileopard.org

Yemen is widely touted as the last great reservoir of Arabian wildlife, with Ras Sharma Protected Area being a site of supreme regional importance, because of the sea turtles that nest there. Unless this area receives real protection, however, the turtles that use it may disappear.

Ras Sharma and Jethmun Beach in the Hadhramawt, form one of the most important nesting areas for marine turtles in Arabia. Of particular importance to Green Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) and Hawksbill Turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), these beaches are also used by Loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*). Leatherbacks (*Dermachelys coriacea*) have been reported off the coast, and there have been unsubstantiated reports of Olive Ridleys (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). In the words of Khaled, one of the soldiers who guard the beaches, "In season they come in their thousands." While this may be exaggerated, it is obvious from the cratered surface that many turtles nest here. It is for this reason, that Ras Sharma was declared a protected area, one of four on the Yemen mainland including Jebel Bura', Ottmah, and Hawf. The Socotra Archipelago Zoning Plan designates an additional 12 terrestrial and 27 marine Nature Sanctuaries with about three quarters of the islands' area declared as National Parkland. For numerous reasons, the archipelago has been nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, although this nomination is by no means secure.

Yemenis claim that Ras Sharma is 'off-limits' but, in my experience, visiting the area unimpeded is simple. Situated about 120 kilometers east of Mukalla, good tar roads approach to within 5 km of the site. A track passable by any car goes directly to the beach which is surrounded by a derelict wall. Money has obviously been allocated for protection, but the project appears defunct.

Threats to the turtles are many. Upon my first visit in December 2006, I saw as many as a dozen Yemenis combing the beach for ghost crabs after sunset. Those that I spoke with said they were off-duty soldiers moonlighting as fishermen, and that they regularly used the beach to collect bait. Given the sensitivity of the turtles that nest here, there is no doubt that many are inhibited by human traffic. Circular tracks show where turtles have pulled U-turns, returning to the sea after having been disturbed by people.

The presence of these turtles is well-known, and tourists visit Ras Sharma daily. In spite of posted regulations and a pamphlet issued by the Environment Protection Authority, many visitors don't realize how easily the turtles can be disturbed. Unchecked, curiosity seekers cause many turtles to abort their nesting missions, and once laying commences the mothers are easily scared off the pits that they struggle to dig in the sand. The eggs thus abandoned have no chance of hatching. Even the most sensitive and cautious tourist may inadvertently interrupt the nesting process.

It is possible also that human consumption of turtle meat and eggs plays a negative role in breeding success at Ras Sharma. Prior to Yemeni Unification on May 22nd, 1990, many soldiers of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen trained in Cuba where they developed a taste for turtle flesh and eggs. Dead, gutted turtles are frequently found on the beach at Ras Sharma although it is unknown whether they have been butchered, or are victims of natural mortality.

By far the greatest threats to the turtles at Ras Sharma, however, are the feral dogs that have discovered this seemingly infinite resource. Healthy canines romp on the beach, fueled by a diet of turtle eggs and

hatchlings. During late October 2007, I saw a bitch with seven chubby puppies lying contentedly, the size and condition of her litter underscoring the richness of her diet. Excavated nests are a common sight at Ras Sharma and the area is littered with dark piles of dog feces dense with miniature flippers.

Ras Sharma is one of the many areas of Yemen that host true wildlife spectacles. Yemen acted well in recognizing the importance of these nesting beaches by declaring the Protected Area. However, for this act to have an impact, it must be followed up with concrete action and enforcement. First, a humane eradication campaign to eliminate feral dogs should be effected. Simultaneously, a functional barrier to impede future canine immigration and control human traffic must be erected. Alternative beaches for bait harvesting can be designated. Finally, well-trained staff to regulate visitors' behavior would limit the damage caused by human intrusions and prevent further canine incursions.

Ras Sharma has been used by turtles for untold millennia. Nesting continues in spite of disturbance by man and his animals, although the future of this spectacle is by no means ensured. With the simple measures prescribed above, and a minimum of will and enforcement, the turtles of Sharma may enjoy a secure future for millennia to come.



Fig 2. A nest abandoned because of human disturbance (©Abe McCullough).



Fig 1. A green turtle nesting at Ras Sharma (©Abe McCullough).



Fig 3. Dog faeces dense with turtle hatchling remains at Ras Sharma (©Fadhil al Eryani).