

SENYAR: A RESCUE TEAM FOR THE MARINE ENVIRONMENT OF KUWAIT



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Operating in Kuwait since July 2008 and sponsored by TOTAL Foundation and TOTAL Kuwait, the Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project (KTCP – www.kuwaitturtles.com) is attempting to explore and unravel the secrets of the Green and Hawksbill turtle populations nesting on the country's tiny atolls Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim. Two nesting seasons behind it and another two ahead, some conclusions are beginning to be drawn, including which is the fact that populations are small, fluctuating tremendously from year to year, and Hawksbills nest on both islets, whereas Greens only nest in Qaru.

Turtles are found elsewhere in Kuwait as well. They are encountered in several stages of life by fishermen and shrimp trawlers, most of which have been using Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) for a number of years now in order to spare turtles a pointless death. They are sometimes encountered swimming with people in the tourist resort of Khiran where some believe they can capture them and keep them as pets. They occasionally nest on southern beaches of the country, close to the beach of Zour, often close to chalets, which have reclaimed their nesting territory. Another type of accidental capture is that of electric power stations pulling in the animals through their pumps and into their water cisterns. Every time something like this happens, an emergency team, the Senyar team, is called to deal with the turtle and get it back into the sea.

Senyar means “together in the sea”. It is a project inaugurated by His Highness the Emir of Kuwait in May 2007 with the purpose of protecting the marine environment of Kuwait. Within the Voluntary Work Center (VWC) of Kuwait, one of the few voluntary organizations in the Arabian Gulf, a dive team was created with the purpose of planting artificial reefs, installing mooring buoys where they are needed, doing beach and sea bed cleanups, searching for gear lost underwater, taking notes of the gaps in environmental legislation regarding the marine environment and rescuing marine animals in distress around the country. In July 2009, the Senyar team, in cooperation with the Scientific Center of Kuwait and the Environmental Protection agency of Kuwait, rescued a whale shark trapped in one of the city's prestigious marinas. More often, however, turtles have to be rescued from accidental capture in industrial installations.

On the 10th of October 2009, the Senyar team was requested by the Shuaiba electricity power plant to visit the premises to see a trapped turtle and remove it from a twelve-meter deep cistern featuring heavily chlorinated sea water. It took nine days to obtain all relevant permits for the Senyar team in

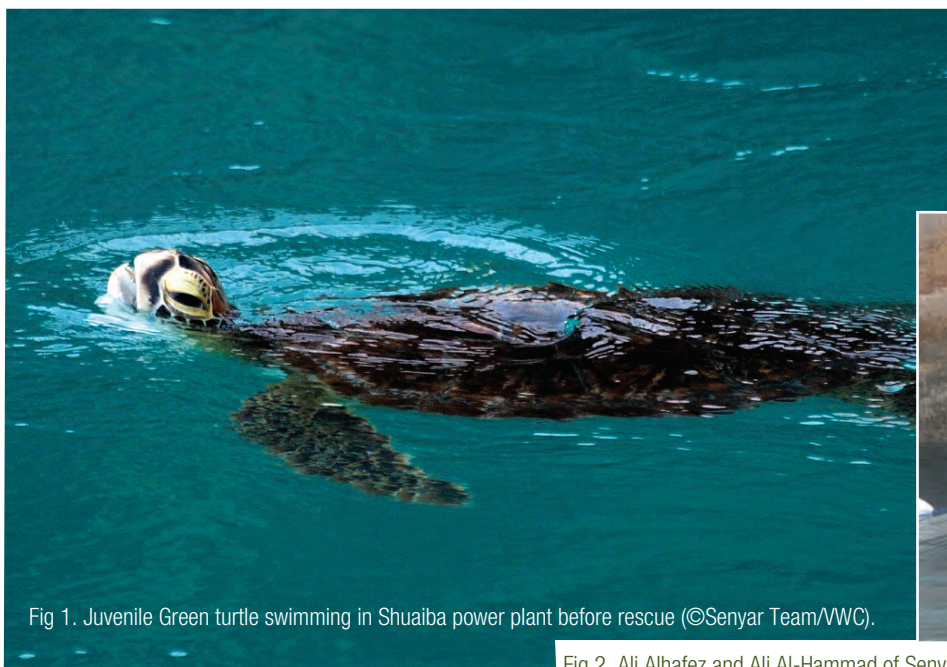


Fig 1. Juvenile Green turtle swimming in Shuaiba power plant before rescue (©Senyar Team/VWC).



Fig 3. Chief of Senyar, Husain Al-Qallaf, holding the rescued turtle (©Senyar Team/VWC).

order to enter these installations, and on the 19th of the month they were ready. Nine team members and two boats, nets, special hooks and tools as well as the determination to finally take the half meter long juvenile Green turtle out of captivity and into freedom set out at noon and had rescued the turtle three hours later. Strong “currents” almost forming a maelstrom were present in the cistern, making smooth movement of the boats difficult, but despite that the operation was successful. The animal was checked for signs of distress, was kept in a specially purchased water tank overnight at the VWC premises and the next day four team members took it away from the dangerous shores of Kuwait to the coastal waters of Kubbar island, where it was released successfully and swam away vigorously.

Several members of Senyar are dedicated members of KTCP and the two projects work closely together towards sea turtle conservation in Kuwait. Such cooperation is rare in the region, where conservationists are rare and usually work individually. Through the two projects' work, awareness about marine life and its fragility is beginning to be raised in Kuwait and it is hoped that this will benefit the coral reefs, turtles, fish and marine mammals which visit and live in the small Gulf nation's seas, possibly forming migration routes to and from several other countries' marine territories inside and outside the Gulf area as well.



Fig 2. Ali Alhafez and Ali Al-Hammad of Senyar preparing to capture the turtle for release (©Senyar Team/VWC).